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Rustling Rob, the Tramp's Protege.

BY EDWARD LYTTON.



"OH! ROB! ROB! YOU HAD BETTER RUN," CLEOPATRA CRIED EXCITEDLY. "WHAT CAN YOU DO AT FIGHTING THESE FELLOWS?"

Rustling Rob,
THE TRAMP'S PROTEGE;
OR,
The Master of The Cedars.

BY EDWARD LYTTON,
AUTHOR OF "FLIP FRED, THE PACK PEDDLER
PRINCE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEACON HALL EXPRESSES HIMSELF.
THINGS in general looked decidedly comfortable as Deacon Samuel Hall entered his tidy kitchen, one blazing hot July day, with the fragrant odor of the harvest-field clinging to his somewhat seedy garments. The kitchen floor was as white and clean as industrious Mother Hall could make it, and the white spread dinner-table was loaded down with smoking-hot edibles such as the thrifty farm-wife knows best how to serve in a palatable manner.

Mrs. Hall sat by a cool window, patiently knitting, and glanced up as her spouse entered and threw off his coat.

They were hale, hearty people, the deacon and his wife, long past the prime of life, and yet well-preserved and young for their years.

"Well, deacon," Mother Hall said, glancing over the top of her spectacles at the deacon's bald crown, upon which the perspiration stood in great beads, "I dare say you found it a warm walk over to The Cedars?"

"Warm?" the deacon echoed, as he mopped off his sunburnt face with a red bandana handkerchief—"warm's no name for it. Everything is scorchin' up wi' the sun. Where is Cleopatra?"

"Law! dear knows—I don't!" and a look of worried resignation came upon Mrs. Hall's motherly face. "I tell you, deacon, there's no use of my trying to manage that child. In spite of all I can say and do, she will have her own way. I presume, if you take the pains to look, you'll find her romping somewhere about the estate, or else fishing down at the river. Dear me! I'm sick and tired of trying to correct her."

"Fiddlesticks! you don't try. You haven't ambition enough to govern a cat. I told the girl to stay here and weed out the onions in the garden, or I'd strap her. Did she do it?"

"Do it?" and a faint smile lit up Mother Hall's features. "Why, deacon, you weren't hardly a dozen yards from the house when she put her finger to her nose after you, and said 'she'd be darned if she was going to weed your onions,' and away she went, like a young calf turned out to pasture!"

"Well! well! WELL!" the deacon said, fetching his cane sharply down upon the floor. "If that don't beat all I ever heard. Why, bless my heart, I'll nigh skin her alive when she returns. I'll learn her who is master here."

And so angered was the deacon, as he sat down at the table, that he would have forgotten to say grace had Mother Hall not reminded him.

"Well, Samuel, how is everything over at The Cedars?" she asked. "I suppose all the good people are well?"

"Yas, they are well," the deacon replied, rather crustily, for he was still contemplating Cleopatra's disobedience and the sound chastisement he would administer to her—"yas, they're all well, and they're goin' to have a big spree over there!"

"A big spree, deacon?"

"Yas, that's what I said. I always believed Algernon Agatha a man of true Christian qualities, but what he's been gone and done now, is a disgrace to the church."

"Laws me! Do tell us what it is!" and Mother Hall looked decidedly anxious.

Mr. Algernon Agatha, the last of his race, and a blue-blooded Virginian, was the owner of a magnificent estate, containing The Cedars, his ancestral residence, and many hundreds of acres. The little town of Rushville was upon this estate, and he owned the larger part of it.

The Agathas for generations had been a proud and wealthy family, more or less distinguished in war and civil life, and at the time of which we write, Algernon Agatha and his daughter were all that were left of their name.

"What has, he done?" echoed Mr. Hall, pausing long enough to rub his nose, which, considering that it was a deacon's "horn," was unnaturally red. Not, of course, that any one would suspect the deacon of indulging in the

flowing bowl, he being a strict church-member, and at the head of the local temperance society at the village; "what's he done? Well, Samantha, he's gone and done something that none but an ungodly man would do. You know today is the eighteenth birthday of his daughter Agnes?"

"Well?"

"Well, what is there going to take place at The Cedars, but a regular spree—I reiterate, a regular *spree*. There's going to be a lawn-party, with a supper and wine, and a band from Washington, and dancing, too—just think of it, *dancing!* Why, it is terrible, and here Algernon's wife hasn't been dead a year yet!"

"Laws me!" gasped Mother Hall too horrified for further utterance.

"And that isn't all, neither," the deacon went on solemnly. "There's a houseful of aristocracy from Washington at The Cedars, and among the lot a rich widow and her son—a senator's widow, in the bargain, and they do say she has come on purpose to set her cap for Algernon, while her son fishes for the daughter."

"Well! well!" sighed Mother Hall.

"It's scandalous!" the deacon averred, "actually scandalous. I, however, cautioned Algernon, and gave him a piece of my mind about the matter. I told him that it was nothing more nor less than a disgrace to our Christian community, and he ought to cut out the wine and dancing. And what on earth sort of an answer d'ye suppose he gave me?"

"Laws knows, Samuel—laws knows. M. Algernon Agatha isn't the same man he used to be. It's politics and fashionable life at the capital that has ruined him."

"For once you are sensible, Samantha—for once you are sensible. Well, he told me that Christianity nor the church had nothing to do with his private affairs, and if I didn't mind my own business a little closer, he should look around for another overseer!"

"Laws me!"

"Yes, indeed! I never was so shocked in my life. I fear, Samantha, there's dishonor and disgrace in store for the proud old name of Agatha, and that, eventually, this home will be sold over our heads, and we shall not have a roof to shelter us."

"Terrible! terrible!"

"Of course it's terrible. But, hush! here comes one of the farm hands. I wonder what's up, now?"

A strapping, sunburnt fellow directly presented himself at the open kitchen door, and doffed his hat out of profound respect for the deacon, who, barring the local minister, was the most revered man in Rushville.

"Well, Peters, what is it?" the deacon asked. "Anything gone wrong?"

"Yas, sir," Peters replied, scraping his foot. "There's a gang of tramps camped down by the river, nigh the Black Slough. They're the hardest lookin' set I ever saw, sir—nigh to twenty on 'em—an' they 'pears to act like they war goin' to stay."

"Indeed! Did you order them away?"

"Yas, sir. au' they told me to go soak my head, or they'd 'rat' me, an' sed as how they known their biz. When they shoyed revolvers I left!"

"I'll see to it, by and by. They may move on, by night. If not, you must get the hired hands together an' hustle 'em off."

"I'm afraid, sir, they won't go without fight."

"Well, you can speak to Mr. Agatha about it, then. He will give you your orders."

And the deacon went on with his dinner, while Peters strode away, shaking his head rather dubiously:

"Them tramps ain't goin' to skedaddle so kindly," he muttered. "This is their first visit for a year, and Jim Bloker's with 'em. That, in itself, means something. He is a desperate character, and his comin' ter the neighborhood of The Cedars, now, ain't all for nothin'—oh, no! Thare's a cloud overhangin' the Agatha home, methinks, even though it be no bigger than a man's hand as yet."

Deacon Hall had expressed sentiments of a somewhat similar nature several times, and Peters, evidently, was, in part, only reiterating them.

CHAPTER II.

RUSTLING ROB.

DEACON HALL had not yet completed his dinner, when his good wife chanced to glance out of the window, and uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Why, here comes Cleopatra now, Samuel!" she exclaimed; "and as I live, she's wringing wet

from top to toe, and there's a ragged boy with her that I never saw before!"

The deacon finished his dinner, and arose and procured a whip from a hook on the wall—one of the rawhide species of whips often used by ox-drivers.

By the time he was reseated at the table, with the whip concealed beneath his coat, Cleopatra and her companion appeared in the doorway.

The girl was about fifteen years of age and the picture of health. Although she had not yet attained her full height, and was of short stature, she was well-formed, strong, and quick of movement.

Her face was one of those laughing faces, pretty of feature, yet whose chief charm was its embodiment of mischief and unruffled good-nature.

Indeed, it seemed as if that face could not look otherwise than laughing, under any circumstances, with its rather large mouth, sparkling eyes, and just the least bit of a pug nose, that added to, instead of detracting from, her beauty. She had a wealth of brown hair, with well-frizzed bangs—but it now was wet and unkempt.

Her coarse but becoming dress, of the Mother Hubbard style, was dripping wet, and she had evidently just come out of a bath.

Her companion was wet, like herself, and rather an unprepossessing-looking lad, in some respects, for his attire was rough and ragged.

A calico shirt, trowsers, stogy shoes, and a "chip" hat, comprised his raiment, but his features were sharp, clear-cut, and of rather patrician mold. His eyes were dark and keen, and his mouth wore "grit" clearly expressed about its firm-set lips. His hair, probably to save combing, had been clipped close to his scalp.

He was seemingly about a year older than the deacon's daughter.

An audible groan escaped Deacon Hall as he glared at the dripping pair, while his spouse put up her hands in horror.

"Well!" the deacon said, looking as angry as he knew how; "well?"

"No, daddy, it wasn't the well!" Miss Cleopatra responded, puckering her mouth into an irresistible grin—"it was the river, daddy!"

"The river, girl? Explain yourself!"

"Well, you see, daddy, them onions were too dry to weed—oh! sure they were, 'til it rains—so I took Joel's snare and went down to the river to snare suckers!"

"Aha! to snare suckers, eh?" and the deacon grew apoplectic.

"Yes, sir! Just think how nice a string o' suckers would have tasted for your dinner if—if I had catched 'em, and—"

Cleopatra edged back a bit as she saw the butt of the rawhide peeping from beneath the deacon's coat-tails.

"Go on, Cleopatra—out with it!" commanded the deacon.

"Well—well, you see, I—I leaned over too far—had an awful big bite—biggest bite I ever had; and I—I went in, ker souise, right in a big hoel, over my head. Golly, I thought I was drowned, and was screechin' like a Guinea hen, when this feller jumped in and saved me. Oh! but wasn't I glad—an' just think of what a funeral bill he saved you, too! This is Rustling Rob, daddy, an' he's a scrumptious feller, too."

"Ha! ha!" the Deacon nodded. "I see! I see! Do you walk into the kitchen, here, Cleopatra?"

"My name ain't Cleopatra—I hate that name. All the men calls me Plucks."

"Do you hear me, Cleopatra?" and the parental foot came down with an imperative stamp. "Come to me!"

"Yes, daughter, you know your pa," chimed in Mother Hall, "and should obey him."

"But—but—ye ain't goin' to lick me, daddy! 'Deed, the onions wouldn't weed, an' it was such a nice day for fishin'. I won't do it again—oh! I won't!"

"Oh, say, guv'nor, let up on the gal, this time," spoke up Rob. "She ain't done nothin' worth lammin' her fer. Ye orter feel thankful the fishes ain't got her!"

"What! d'ye dare to dictate to me, you young beggar?" cried the deacon. "Why, bless my soul, if I catch you I'll skin you alive!"

"You ain't got me yet," Rob retorted, unabashed. "I'm jest as slippery as a eel w'ot fell in a soft-soap bar'l. You let up on Plucks, now, 'ca'se she's all O. K. Ef ye won't lam her, I'll weed the hull garden fer ye!" and the young Rustler spoke determinedly.

"Worse an' worse! Boy, if ye don't leave these premises, instanter, I'll put a load o' buckshot into you."

Rob laughed.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "You

be a queer old cove, ain't you? Do I look like a boy as were afeard o' pepper an' salt? No, sir-eel I'm a tramp, and I wouldn't weigh half what I do if the buckshot was all picked out o' my skins. Have to try some other racket if ye want to skeer Rob the Rustler. But I say—ye ain't goin' ter lick Plucksy, be you? That would be a dog-goned shame, so it would. She is a bum-tum gal, an' durned if she deserves bein' licked."

"Yes, I'm goin' to lick Cleopatra," the deacon said, with grim emphasis; "an' what's more, if you don't clear out inside of a jiffy, I'll have you thrashed within an inch of your life!"

"Who'll do it?" demanded the Rustler.

"I'll show you!" the deacon cried. "Cleopatra, come in here!"

"I won't, unless you'll promise not to lick me!" Plucks replied, on receiving a reassuring whisper from Rob.

"You won't, eh?" roared the deacon, now thoroughly enraged. "We'll see!"

He arose from the table, with the whip firmly clutched in his hand, and sprung toward his disobedient daughter.

She ran back into the yard, behind her ragged friend, who firmly stood his ground, with flashing eyes.

"Don't you strike me!" he cried, sharply. "I wouldn't like to tussle with an old cove like you, but I'll be gum-blasted if you are goin' to whale Plucksy, all for nothin', when I'm around!"

Unmindful of the boy's warning, the deacon raised the whip, and laid it soundly over Rob's back and shoulders.

Fired with anger, the young tramp submitted to but a few blows ere he seized the whip and wrested it from the deacon's grasp, and sent it flying away several yards.

"You old snoozer, ef you wasn't Plucksy's father I'd lick blazes out o' you," he cried, beligerently.

"Samantha, blow the horn for Clem!" fairly shrieked the deacon. "I'll see if I'll be served like this."

Instantly the clear notes of the dinner-horn resounded, and in a moment Cleopatra cried out:

"Look out, Rob—scoot! Here comes Clem and Abe!"

Rob looked around and beheld two burly-looking negroes hastening toward the farm-house from a neighboring harvest-field.

"Me run?" he retorted, contemptuously. "Well, I guess not! I don't stan' in fer a gal an' then run away an' leave her—not much! If I have to, I'll lick the niggers, an' the old man in the bargain!" and he looked as if he were confident that he could do it.

But boys often overrate their powers, and thus it was with Rustling Rob.

Three against one was too big an odds, and it would have been discretion for him to have "scooted," as Plucks had advised.

CHAPTER III.

ROB GETS A WALLOPING.

On came the negroes, who were of unusual size and decidedly brutal of aspect.

"Oh! Rob! Rob! you had better run," Cleopatra cried, excitedly. "What can you do at fighting those fellows?"

"Can't most always sometimes tell till I try, Plucksy," was the youth's cool reply. "Ef they tetch me, you'll see nigger fur fly."

"Then you won't clear out?" Deacon Hall demanded, eying the boy angrily, although he secretly admired his grit.

"Nary a clear!" responded Rob, firmly. "I wasn't fetched up among tramps all fer no good. A tramp is as good as a Turk any time, an' he ain't 'most always a coward."

By this time the two negroes had bounded over the fence and stood in the yard awaiting the overseer's orders.

"What is it, boss?" the largest of the two whose name was Abraham, asked.

"You see this young jacknapes!" the deacon cried. "Well, he's a tramp and one of the ungodly. He has insulted me on my own premises, and I want you to administer to him a severe chastisement that will be a lesson to him in the future. Seize him!"

With grins of approval, the two negroes rushed toward the boy.

There was a brief but desperate struggle, and although Abraham went tumbling to the ground from the effects of one of Rob's well-aimed blows Clem threw himself bodily upon the boy, and succeeded in holding him in a firm hug.

Abe quickly regained his feet, and in a jiffy Rob's hands were bound, and he was a prisoner beyond doubt.

"Aha! so we've got you, eh?" the deacon cried, triumphantly. "I presume you'll give in now, my smart youngster!"

"Not muchly!" Rob cried, as game as ever. "Cause it took the three o' ye to capture me, that ain't sayin' I weaken. Just wait till I get free an' see what I'll do."

"Will you? We'll see about that. You're going to catch the worst tanning you ever had. By the time you are through you'll be glad to do your tramping in some other part of the country. Boys, tear the shirt from his back, and tie him to yonder tree."

The negroes proceeded to obey orders with alacrity. They had evidently had their initiation, long before, in the torture of the lash, and were in nowise loth to try the experiment at some one else's expense.

"Oh! daddy! daddy! please don't flog him!" Plucks cried, pleadingly—"oh! please don't, now, that's a good daddy. You may lick me all you want to, but please don't lick him!"

"Oh! ye'll take the young vagabone's part, hey?" roared the deacon. "Wait till I get you in the house, girl—just you wait!"

The negroes had by this time got the Rustler stripped to the waist and lashed to a tree which grew near the kitchen door, with his face toward the tree.

The boy had not lied when he had made his brag that he was filled with buckshot, for there were numerous places upon his back, whose black spots showed that he had been literally peppered with bird-shot.

"Dar, boss, we've fixed him!" said Abe, with a triumphant grin.

"Good! Get the whip an' give him ten good cuts, and if he don't squeal, and promise never to show up around these parts again, give him the gad till he does!"

Abe seized the whip with a chuckle of satisfaction. One of his eyes was now swollen shut from the effects of Rob's right-hander, and he meant to improve the chance before him to get even with the young pugilist.

The first blow he struck caused a red welt to arise upon the young tramp's white back, but he uttered no outcry, although the pain must have been intense.

The second, third and fourth each drew blood, but elicited no expression of pain from Rob, who clearly was so "gritty" that he would stand great torture before begging for mercy.

"Put it on harder! Cuthim in two, but what he shall squeal!" yelled the deacon, now savagely. "I'll larn tramps to come around these premises and sass me—I'll larn'em! Tuck on the gad harder, I tell ye, Abe; make the snipe squeal for mercy!"

"I'll die before I'll do that!" cried the boy defiantly. "I ain't that breed wot takes water."

"Oh, you ain't, hey? We'll see—we'll see!"

And the deacon, now thoroughly unmasked of his piety, fairly danced with delight as Abe laid on the whip with renewed energy.

How long the inhuman punishment would have continued would be hard to say, had not a new arrival upon the scene put a stop to it; for there was the clatter of hoofs, and a horseman dashed up along the farm-house fence and drew rein.

"Hello! there!" he cried, hastily drawing a pistol from his hip-pocket and cocking it. "What sort of business is this, I should like to know? Hi! there, you black rascals! Throw down that whip and release that boy, or I'll put a bullet through each of your hearts. And as for you, Deacon Hall, I am astonished!"

In ringing tones the horseman spoke the words, and Abe and Clem hastened to obey his command, while Deacon Hall shrunk back as if the rebuke had stung him.

The horseman was a handsome young fellow of not over four-and-twenty, of well-molded physique, and a clear-cut, open face, of pleasing expression, lit up by a pair of brilliant brown eyes, and adorned by a gracefully trained mustache.

He was well, but not flashily attired, and his horse-trappings were of superior quality.

"Yes, Deacon Hall, I am astonished at you," he repeated. "That you, an avowed Christian, should degrade yourself by seconding such a piece of cruelty as this. What will your brethren of the church say?"

"I don't care a picayune what they say," the deacon declared bluntly, "and you've no business to meddle in the affair, Frank Staples."

"But I make it my business, all the same," young Staples retorted. "I don't allow any one to suffer when I am about, without there is a good cause for it."

"The boy's a tramp, connected with a thiev-

ing gang of tramps, and when I ordered him to clear out he openly defied me, the insolent rat," blustered the deacon.

"Yes, an' he was a-goin' to lam his gal, all fer fallin' in the river, an' cause I wouldn't let him, he got all crease-crossed," chimed in Rob, trying to put on what was left of his tattered shirt. "He's a mean old rascal, and if he wasn't so old I'd lick blazes out of him myself."

"You'd hardly be censurable if you did it anyhow, I should say, considering the flogging you got. But, my boy, you'd better take a skip now, while you have a chance," and Staples tightened up on his reins, as if about to depart.

"Oh, I'll go, fast enough," the Rustler said, "but, first, sir, I want to have a private word with you."

"With me?" And young Staples looked his surprise.

"Yes, sir: with you, that is, if your name is Frank Staples."

"That is my name, my lad, but I cannot imagine what you can have to say to me in private, for I'll vow I never saw you before. However, come along, and be brief with what you have to ask."

"Oh, I ain't on the beg!" Rob answered. "Good-by, Plucksy! Take care the old man don't get his hooks on you." And with this advice the young tramp followed Frank Staples, who was riding slowly away.

Down the dusty country road, out of earshot from the farm-house, Staples drew rein, however, and surveyed Rob rather critically as he came up.

"Well, now, my lad, what is it?" he asked, just the least bit of an anxious expression upon his face. "If you have anything to communicate that particularly concerns me, out with it."

"Oh, you bet!" the young Rustler assented, seating himself on the top board of the fence by the roadside. "I jest wanted ter tell ye ter keep an eye out, fer thar's breakers ahead."

"I do not understand you."

"Oh, ye don't, hey? Well, I'll try an' elucidate more clearly. Ye heerd old Fuffemblow, back yonder, call me a tramp?"

"Yes."

"Well, he told the truth. I am a tramp, an' am one of a band of twenty-odd other tramps, ye see."

"I see; but what on earth does this fact have to do with your interview with me?"

"A heap, as ye will find out. Hev you ever heerd of sech a feiler as Bloker—Jim Bloker?"

Young Staples's countenance changed expressions.

"I have," he admitted. "Go on."

"Oh, you bet! Ye saved me from gettin' wuss skinned than I did, an' I'll make things as clear as I can. A year ago a gang o' tramps camped in this neighborhood, an' ole Buck Brandt war ther captain. The old man was a rich old coon, havin' tramped an' bin savin' all o' his life, an' he allers carried his boddle with him, not trustin' in banks an' savin' instertooshuns half so much as he did in his own gang."

"Well, just afore comin' to this vicinity one o' the party had gi'n it his intention to cheese on trampin', an' accordinly bid the gang good-by, and that's the last as was see'd o' him. He was rather high-toned, an' several notches above the standard of the usual tramp, an' his name was Frank Staples."

"Correct!—go on," young Staples said, betraying considerable eagerness.

"Well," Rob pursued, "nothin' purtic'ler was thought about his secedin' until the gang come to this vicinity, when their leader, old Buck Brandt, disappeared, money and all, and no trace could be found of him, nor no tidings. The gang at once agreed that it was a case of foul play, and that you were interested in it."

"Ah!"

"Exactly. A search was made for you, the gang havin' sworn to take revenge upon you, but it was not until recently that Bloker learned that ye was here in Rushville, an' cashier of Agatha's bank. So the gang tramped this way, an' have arriv'. They mean to raise ructions wi' you."

"Indeed!" and young Staples's face flushed with anger. "So they believe I was instrumental in the old captain's disappearance, eh? Well, all I've got to say is, they can't prove anything of the sort, and if they come bothering me they'll find out they're barking at the wrong coon. So far as old Brandt was concerned, he no doubt took French leave of the gang, for fear they'd want him to share, should he propose an open withdrawal."

"No use o' yer tryin' to make the gang believe anythin' o' that sort—oh no! Ye see, a big scheme was out to rob an old chap up the State

—a reg'lar ten thousan' er—an' the capt'in were at the head o' the plan. So the gang argues that he wouldn't a' slid off an' left 'em, anyhow, till arter that job is over. They say it's as plain as nose-paint to them that old Buck has met with foul play, an' that you know all about it. Dunno how they're goin' ter sting ye first, but the gang is here for bizness, an' aire goin' to stay until it's through. But, I say, don't ye let or I told ye, or old Bloker would skin me alive, bein's he don't worship me partic'ler much, anyhow."

"All right, my boy. You can depend on it I'll do nothing to bring trouble on your shoulders, and I am deeply indebted to you for your kindness in supplying me with the information. Why are you a member of this band of bad men?"

"Oh! I dunno. Hain't got any other way o' gettin' along. Bloker picked me up last winter, when I was starvin', and sed if I'd come with him he'd support me, an' make a man of me, soon's I got bigger."

"I hope you don't steal, boy, or commit any sort of crime?"

"Not me! If they wants me to do anything I think ain't right, I plays off sick, an' Snooks does it."

"I traveled with the tramps," said Frank, "because I was as poor as a church mouse, and could move in no better society than that from which my spirit rebelled. Finally, however, I made a resolution to strike out, and good fortune materially aided me in gaining the enviable position I now hold. You come to me to-morrow, and I'll see if I can't do something to lift you out of the depths you are now struggling in. Don't forget!" and touching up his horse with the spur, the ex-tramp galloped away.

The young tramp watched him until he disappeared then turned his gaze toward the deacon's farm-house.

"The mean old skeeslyx," he muttered, a twinge of pain causing his mind to revert to the punishment he had received. "If I could see the gal I'd coax her away from home. Guess he's taken her in the house, an' is lammin' her. Heigh-ho! I wonder what Bloker has got for dinner?" and climbing over the fence he made his way across lots toward the river, half a mile distant—its location marked by a long fringe of trees along its bank.

"Yes, there's trouble in store for Frank Staples," the boy muttered, "an' if I can keep 'im posted, so as no harm won't come to him, I'll do it, for he seems like a nice sort of fellow, even if he is under a cloud. Spect no one hereabouts knows as how he was ever a tramp. Ho! ho! I expect that will be old Bloker's first attack. An' I heerd him tell Big Sanders how he was a-goin' ter use 'me as the stool-pigeon ag'in' this Staples. Now, won't I make a 'fly' old pigeon, eh? They better not get stuck on my honesty toward 'em, neither!"

CHAPTER IV.

A "DOWNED" DUDE.

WE have intimated that Mr. Algernon Agatha was not only the most aristocratic and blue-blooded, but in all probability the wealthiest citizen of that county of Virginia, in which his princely estate, The Cedars, was located.

The Cedars, proper, was a large modern villa, located in a little grove near the edge of the placidly flowing river that ran through the estate, and the furnishings of the dwelling and the elegant arrangement of the immediate surroundings showed the agency of an artistic, as well as a lavish hand.

Flowers, statuary, rustic arbors and fountains were among the things that contributed to make the grounds a literal paradise, while those who were fortunate enough to get a view of the interior of the mansion, told marvelous stories of the many poor-men's fortunes absorbed in the general adornment.

Little wonder was it, then, that The Cedars became a noted place, and Mr. Algernon Agatha was looked up to as the great man of his own particular section of the country.

Not a week—scarcely a day—passed but what The Cedars extended its hospitality to some distinguished guest, either acquaintances of Mr. Agatha, or of his beautiful daughter, so that the place was literally one constant scene of conviviality and social intermingling of the first families.

Half a mile from The Cedars lay the little staid old village of Rushville, with its cemetery on the bluff of the river, and from which, in all directions, stretched away the fertile acres of the Agatha estate. There was little life or business in the village, except of the humdrum

sort, owing principally to the fact that nearly all of the inhabitants were in the employ of the Agatha estate, and there was no cause for any particular enterprise on their part.

The occasion of Miss Agatha's eighteenth birthday had been liberally arranged for, and all pains taken for the perfection of preparations which would make the natal-day festivities unsurpassed in that section.

Guests were present from both neighboring and distant towns, and three o'clock that sultry afternoon, saw the lawn and grove thronged with richly-attired and cultured people, all seemingly united in the one task of enjoying the occasion.

A military band from Washington discoursed soul-inspiring music from an awning shaded balcony, and there were dancing, promenades, games and *tete-a-tetes* about the different portions of the grounds.

Beaux and belles, both young and old, were there, and everything seemed to conspire to make it a joyous occasion long to be remembered.

With the stately bearing of a lord, Mr. Algernon Agatha moved among his guests, bearing upon his arm the magnificently attired Mrs. Vandervliet, of Washington, a large, rosy-cheeked, and not unhandsome woman of five-and-forty, more noticeable for her *avordupois* than for the grace of her movements. Yet she was a senator's relict, said gossip, and a belle of Washington society, and it was highly reasonable to suppose that Mr. Agatha was proud of being her escort.

A fine looking gentleman was the owner of The Cedars—tall and commanding of figure, with a face that would have been classed "kindly," but for its habitual expression of conscious and severe dignity. His eyes were gray, and cold in their glance, while his side-whiskers and mustache were literally sprinkled with threads of silver.

Miss Agnes Agatha, a decided beauty of the brunette type, was also seen flitting about and doing all in her power to make every one feel at home and enjoy themselves.

Accompanying her was Mr. Valentine Vandervliet, the widow's son—a slim, sallow young man, whom fine clothes nor glittering jewels could make an attractive or entertaining partner, for he was awkward, conventional to a fault, and of an irritable temper.

Nature had slighted him so far as facial or physical beauty was concerned, and only the fact that he was a Vandervliet saved him from the ridicule of the social circle in which he moved.

That Miss Agatha did not take kindly to his insipid attentions might well be guessed, but she was a girl of refinement and intelligence, and too ladylike to manifest her dislike for one whom her father had requested her to be particular about entertaining; "for," added the owner of The Cedars, "you know it's made up between Mrs. Vandervliet and myself that you two children are well matched, and shall eventually marry."

Whatever Agnes's thoughts were on the matter, she refrained from giving expression to them, but went pleasantly about the task of playing the agreeable to the Washington dude, only to find him far beneath her in mental qualities—shallow, insipid, and, of course, egotistic as all shallow and insipid persons are.

"Do you know, my dear Miss Agatha, that my ma said I would fall in love with you?" he asked, as they wandered about, "and I do believe ma is right. It would make me really, deucedly jealous to see you enjoying any other fellow's society, even as short as has been our acquaintance."

"Indeed, sir—that would be a strange restraint to impose upon me," Agnes replied. "I certainly am at liberty to accept the attentions of any gentleman."

"Oh! yes—y-e-s; that is—but—but you know ma said that in all likelihood we would marry between now and the holidays, and it would be really naughty of you to make me jealous. You know my ma and your pa have decided that we would make a most excellent match."

"Very kind of them, is it not? I should presume, however, that it would be well to consult me first, before entering into any absolute contracts to deliver property," Agnes said, her eyes flashing.

"Oh, dear me! Why, you surely would do just as your pa said, would you not? Why, I do precisely everything as my ma instructs me to do—oh! my, yes."

"Oh! I suppose it's all according to the way you are brought up!" Agnes laughed, while at heart she felt like pushing her companion into

the river, near at hand, so disgusted she was with him.

Later, she excused herself, and found her way to where Frank Staples, well dressed and handsome, stood leaning idly against a tree, watching the dancers.

Frank was in one sense, her favored suitor, for, though parental objection prevented his formally courting the fair heiress in her father's home, there were many clandestine meetings between the two; who, if not declared lovers to the world, were such to one another.

"Oh! Frank, you can not guess how glad I am to see you here," Agnes said, putting out her hand. "Did papa really invite you? It was so kind and considerate of him."

"Certainly he did, *ma belle*, and to tell the truth I was not a little surprised. How have you been enjoying yourself?"

"Oh! dear, I have been bored to death by a silly dude from Washington, whom I learn papa has imported for the sole purpose of winning my heart. But, you can best guess what success he will have, Frank!"

And she gave him a glance that filled him with delight.

"I hope he will not succeed," he said, pressing the fair hand he still held in his own. "But this world is so fickle and changing that one can little tell when something will arise to dash fondest hopes and expectations."

"Why, Frank! Why do you speak thus? Has anything happened—"

"No! no!" he said, hastily, yet rather absently. "Nothing *has* happened, but something might. I have enemies, and I have learned that they contemplate venting their spite on me by trying to get me into some trouble. In what form it will come I am ignorant, but I am satisfied that it will come eventually."

"Oh, how sorry I am to hear this! Who are your enemies?"

"Those far beneath me in station, who would not stop at any crime to injure me, because I have been successful. I want you to promise me one thing, Agnes—that, whatever happens, —whatever attempts are made to drag me down, you will still trust and believe in me."

"Of course I will, Frank! You know I belong to you, and I'll never desert you, even though all the world may seek to drag you down. But, look! Mr. Vandervliet has spied us and is coming this way. Don't mind anything he says, for I really do believe he is simple. Isn't he a specimen, though!"

A faint smile curled Frank Staples's lip as he gazed at the slim Washingtonian, who was striding rapidly toward them.

"He looks rather put out about something, eh?" he observed. "Can it be he means to play the dickens with me for daring to speak to you?"

A moment more and young Vandervliet was confronting them, and looking as positively jealous and savage as it was in his insipid face to look.

"See here, my deah fellow, by what right do you detain this young lady, when the guests are awaiting her? You certainly take unwarranted liberties, sir."

"You jackanapes!" retorted Frank, scornfully; "it's none of your business if I do detain Miss Agatha."

"Aw! none of my business, eh? Why, sir, this young lady is under my special charge today, and I've a mind to twig your nose for your insolence."

Frank was now amused, for he laughed heartily.

"What! do you dare insult me, sir? Why, I'll chastise you with my cane, you impudent puppy!" and he bristled up menacingly.

"I'd advise you not to do anything as wicked as that," Frank returned, with composure. "If you want to quarrel, go down to the stables. Come, Miss Agnes, will you walk over to the boat-house?"

"No, she *won't!*" young Vandervliet cried, fiercely. "I'll learn you to mind your own business, you cur!" and lifting his slender walking-stick he gave Frank a cut across the face.

The next instant he lay outstretched on the grass, from a blow of Frank's right fist, which had caught him over the eye.

For an instant he flounced about as if he were in the very agonies of death; then, recovering the use of his lungs, he screamed lustily.

"Murder! police! help! help! help!"

"Oh, Frank! What have you done? Fly! quick, before my father comes!" Agnes cried, excited and anxious. "Oh, dear! He will be so angry."

"I can not help that," Staples replied, firmly. "If be has any sense at all he will see that I was warranted in knocking the fool down."

Vandervliet's yells instantly brought to the spot a number of the guests, Mrs. Vandervliet and Mr. Algernon Agatha with them.

"Hello! what is the matter here?" the latter cried, sternly, taking in the situation at a glance, while Mrs. Vandervliet, uttering a hysterical scream, knelt beside her fallen son.

"Did you strike the gentleman, Mr. Staples?"

"I knocked down that piece of anatomy, if you choose to call it a *gentleman*," Frank replied, his cheeks flushing. "He calleⁱ me a puppy, and struck me in the face with his cane, and I retaliated without hesitation."

There was a tinge of defiance in the young man's tones, and he spoke as if he meant every word of it.

Agatha's face grew pale with anger in an instant.

"I am astonished at you, sir!" he cried. "When I invited you here, I did not suppose you would show so little breeding as to assault one of my special guests. You can go, sir—I will see you later."

"But, papa, listen! Mr. Staples was not to blame," spoke up Agnes. "I was talking to him when Mr. Vandervliet came up and demanded of Mr. Staples what right he had to address me. Mr. Staples rightly informed him that it wasn't any of his business, whereupon Mr. Vandervliet used his cane, and Mr. Staples knocked him down. Now, pray, where is Mr. Staples more in the wrong than Mr. Vandervliet?"

"It's all false—every word of it!" broke forth young Vandervliet. "I caught the impudent fellow kissing your daughter, sir, and in your behalf called him to account, whereupon he called me a vile name, and blows followed."

"That is a silly, contemptible lie, you cowardly sneak! I'll break every bone in your body for that falsehood!"

"Of course it is absurdly false!" put in Agnes, clinging to Frank's arm. "Don't mind it, Frank, please."

"Frank, eh?" cried Mr. Agatha. "You two seem on very familiar speaking terms for comparative strangers. Staples, leave these grounds at once, and wait for me at the village. Agnes, go into the house—this disgrace is terrible. Mr. Vandervliet, allow me to both apologize and thank you. We none of us have the least doubt as to your veracity, and you are to be highly commended for your prompt action. I'll see that nothing like this occurs again."

CHAPTER V.

RUSTLING ROB GETS A LUNCH.

FRANK STAPLES bowed as an answer to Mr. Agatha's command, tipped his hat, and, turning, walked toward the entrance-gates of the grounds, through which he soon disappeared.

Agnes accompanied her father toward the house, and the guests for the time being, were left to entertain and amuse themselves.

By the time the parent and daughter reappeared, the tables had been spread beneath a canvas booth, and preparations were being made for the luncheon.

Agnes's eyes showed traces of weeping, but she was otherwise composed, and entered gracefully into the spirit of the joyous occasion as though nothing had occurred to mar her happiness.

She however shunned the society of Vandervliet, whom she now thoroughly detested, and he had good sense enough to "give her a wide berth," probably knowing that all had seen through the falsehood he had manufactured to screen himself.

Thus it was not long ere matters had assumed something of the gayety that had prevailed prior to the interruption; but there was destined to be another interruption of an unexpected character—namely, the arrival of Rob, the young tramp.

How he had gained access to the grounds no one knew, but he had certainly arrived.

When first spied he was standing by one of the yet untouched tables, helping himself to a liberal amount of the most tempting fruits and other delicacies with which it was loaded.

A cry of "stop thief!" was instantly raised, which brought Mr. Agatha once more to the scene.

Rob stopped momentarily to gaze at the crowd, that had gathered, but made no effort to escape; rather a broad grin distorted his visage as he noted the astonishment and horror depicted upon the faces of the company.

"Howdy!" he said, taking a huge bite of a piece of frosted cake. "Got a reg'lar old feast here, ain't ye? Hain't struck such a fat snap in a year, by go!"

"Boy! what do you mean?" thundered Mr. Agatha, strides forward and seizing the young vagabond by the arm. "What are you doing here? Who told you to help yourself to things, sir?"

"Reckon I invited myself, boss. I tell yer, when a feller's stomach gits ter huggin' his backbone he ain't so werry partic'ler whar he eats, or ther style o' folks w'ot surrounds him. Poverty is a great leveler, you bet, an' he an' I hev known each other for several winters and summers."

"You insolent reprobate. I'll learn you to enter my grounds and steal thus boldly from my table—I'll learn you!"

"No use tryin' boss, 'ca'se I've got ther bizness down fine, yer see, an' you can't give me no p'ints. Mebbe I did boldly help myself, boss, but, come, now, weren't that better ner to sneak in, gobble up, an' scoot? Waal, I should simper!"

"You young rascal. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Me? Oh! I'm Rustling Rob, from Chicago—retired bootblack. As for my business here, I came of an errand."

"To steal something, I dare say!"

"Oh! no—nothing bigger than a farm or two. I got tangled up among the wittles, it is true, but my real object is comin' inter sech society as this was to see an old duffer called Agatha—a reg'lar old out-an'-outer, rich as Vanderbilt, but twice as mean, they say."

"Indeed! Well, my fine specimen of embryo ruffianism, you find yourself in the grasp of the person you intimate you came to see. Now, then, explain yourself instanter, or I'll pick you up and throw you in the river."

"That wouldn't work, boss, 'ca'se I can swim like a bullfrog. But, shol! you ain't Agatha, aire ye? Well! well! Put it there, old stock-in's!" and the incorrigible urchin actually put out his disengaged hand to shake, for which piece of impudence he received a shaking which fairly made his teeth chatter.

"Oh, say, let up!" he cried. "That ain't fair, just because I wanted to cultivate your acquaintance. If you give a feller any show fer his money, I'll explain. I have an important message to deliver to you, but you'll have to bounce the gawpers here, fer this w'ot I've got ter say is strictly private."

"Throw the impudent rat into the river!" spoke up young Vandervliet.

"Thow me in the river, eh?" cried Rob, quickly, as he turned his gaze upon the dude.

"Oh, you snoozier! Wait till I get a good chance. I'll black t'other eye for you, you son of a sausage-maker!"

"Will you keep still?" thundered Agatha. "Come along with me!" and still retaining his grasp upon the young tramp he walked away, and did not halt until well out of hearing of any of the guests; then Mr. Agatha commanded:

"Now, sir, be out with what you have to say, in short order! You say you came here on an errand. Who sent you?"

"My boss."

"Who is your boss, then?" with angry impatience.

"Oh, he's a hard nut, he is; can't crack him wi' a sledge hammer. He's a tramp, like me, 'cept that he's a big 'un, an' I ain't. He knows you like a top!"

"Indeed! I was not aware that my acquaintance extended to tramps. His name, sir?"

"Is Jim Bloker, and here's what he sent ye," and from the only trustworthy pocket in his ragged clothing he fished out a crumpled note, which he handed to Mr. Agatha.

It was but a scrap of paper—probably all the writer could secure—and was covered with chirography of a very irregular style:

"MR. ALGERNON AGATHY:—

"DEAR SUR:—By these few lines ye will no I hev arriv, an' wanter see yer. Of coarse you durent refuse to reseeve me fer ye kno I'm a bad man, an' hev got ther clincher on yer. Tel the kid wot hour I shel call.

"JIM BLOKER."

Rob was watching the owner of The Cedars while he perused the missive, and keenly noted the changing expressions of his countenance—of mingled surprise, anger and apprehension.

Agatha, having finished the perusal, put the note in his pocket, and gazed sharply at the boy.

"Did you read the note?" he demanded.

"Me? I can't read my own name. Wish I

could read. Might tell then what made ye look so shaky an' scart."

"You are too smart by half. The House of Correction would be a good place for you."

"Oh! cracky, no! Spent six months in the Kareck, up in Chicago, an' got smarter an' smarter every day, till they sed my wits were so sharp ye could cut a rump-steak with 'em. But say, now that I've fetched ye the message, can't ye let a feller go an' make a square meal over ther'?"

"No! Paupers and tramps are not entertained at The Cedars. There's a county poorhouse for such as you!"

"Oh! there is, eh? Heigh-ho! Wish I was a big-bug! Waal, ye goin' ter tell me what ter say to Bloker?"

"No. I will send him a written reply."

Tearing a leaf from a note-book, he penciled the message upon it, and gave it to the tramp.

"Now do you get out of the grounds and take that to your master," he said, giving Rob a push toward the gate. "Begone!"

"Yes, I'll go!" the young Rustler replied; "but, oh! you just wait till I get rich!"

Agatha turned away with a light laugh that was full of hate—not peace of mind or pleasure.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAMP CHIEF.

THE tramps, of whom Bloker was captain and leading spirit, were camped at a bend in the river, at a point where a swamp began, and continued on both sides of the stream, until it reached the bluff on which was located the Rushville Cemetery.

The swamp had often served as a place of refuge for criminals, and being full of intricate channels and treacherous forest bogs, great difficulty was experienced in hunting out a fugitive.

The tramps had not ventured into the swamp, but had boldly camped down upon the bend, erected a small tent, and made general preparations to stay awhile.

Fish were plentiful in the river, and these, with what food they could pilfer, were sufficient for the needs of the band.

There were twenty-one of the party, including Rustling Rob. All were unprepossessing specimens of the *genus* tramp, and represented the off-courting of several nationalities.

Bloker himself was of swarthy complexion, with black hair, mustache and eyes.

In but one point did he excel his comrades. Although coarse and unkempt, his attire was not quite so ragged and dirty as theirs, and his hair, evidently, was accustomed to the use of a brush once in a while.

The entire gang were lounging about under the trees, sleeping or smoking as the case might be, when Rustling Rob returned from The Cedars.

As he walked, he had perused the message given him by Agatha, which was as follows:

"Sir:—Your strange note at hand. Although your meaning is not clear to me, I fancy I trace the identity of another, under the disguise of Bloker. What you are doing here, I cannot comprehend, but it will be as good as your death-warrant to try any of your rough tramp games on me."

"ALGERNON AGATHA."

This message Rob delivered to Bloker, who lay upon the grass, sullenly puffing away at his pipe.

"Well, ye're back, hey?" the captain demanded. "How'd ye make out?"

"Oh, fine. I got in among the silk folks, an' helped myself to the good things, an' when the boss said nay, I slid in my errand on him, an' ambled. High-flavored old party, thar, an' no mistake."

Bloker did not reply, but read the message, his brows assuming a darker scowl as he did so.

"Cuss him!" he gritted, tearing the leaf of paper into bits. "He's as cool as a cucumber. Did he say anything about my note, boy?"

"Nary, 'cept he axed me could I read, an' when I sed no, he writ the note and told me to git up an' light out."

Bloker was silent for a few minutes, in apparent meditation; then he arose, his face wearing the stolid expression it always wore, except when angered.

"Come along, boy," he said, gruffly. "I've something to tell you," and he moved away, inland.

Rob followed wonderingly, for the tones of his singular protector were less harsh than usual.

Reaching the shelter of a great cedar, Bloker sat down, motioning Rob to do likewise, but it was several minutes ere the captain spoke, and in the mean time he gazed fixedly at the ground.

"Boy," he said finally, measuring his words as if to ascertain the correct value of each before he uttered it—"boy, what sort of opinion d'ye have of me?"

Rob stared. He had expected any other question than that.

"Why, I dunno," he replied. "What makes you ask that?"

"Oh! because. Ye look on me as a rough, surly sort o' fellow, with few scruples, an' yet with a heart in me, when I find a poor cuss in a fix—like I did you?"

"Guess I'll let you do the talkin' as you hit the nail purty nigh on the head."

"I thought so. Well, I ain't so good as an angel, but when I picked onto you, I did it out of mercy an' pity fer ye, not knowin' till afterward that I had struck a prize I had been lookin' for."

"No!"

"You bet! But what d'ye think of The Cedars?"

"Oh, that's a boss place, you bet!"

"Yes; it's a high-toned place, for a fact. How'd you like to live thar, an' be the master of it?"

Rob stared again.

"Hello! Where'd you ketch on?" he demanded, eying his questioner.

"Ketch on what?" growled Bloker.

"Why, on the likker?"

"Nonsense! I haven't had a smell in a week. I suppose you think I'm crazy: but supposin' you were master of The Cedars—how would you feel?"

"Whoop-ee! Why, I'd feel 'way up in G."

"Exactly. You'd be another blue-blooded, black-hearted aristocrat like Algernon Agatha, eh?"

"Guess not! That ain't my sort. Ef I was a millionaire, I'd still remember that I was once as lean as the back-bone of a codfish."

"You would?"

"Bet yer boots!"

"Then ag'in, supposin' I was ter tell you that there was a possible way of making you master of The Cedars?"

"I'd bet five cents to a cud ye had the jims."

Bloker laughed grimly.

"Stranger things have happened in well regulated families," he remarked, rising. "But that's neither here nor there. I'm going to the village, now, an' I want you to squat right where you are until I return. D'ye hear?"

"You bet. I ain't deaf."

"See that ye ain't. Ef ye git lonesome, read this Testament, an' don't ye lose it, fer I sometimes say my prayers," and flinging a little pamphlet upon the grass, he strode rapidly away.

Rob gazed after him, his dirty countenance expressing his deep perplexity.

"He's a queer 'un," he muttered. "I sometimes believe he's off his base; yet he 'most allus is karect in judgin' things. But what the dickens was he drivin' at just now is more than I can tell. Thar's a big heap of significance in the gang's comin' to these diggin's, but what? Then, too, Bloker has got some big racket he intends workin' out—that's flat—an' Frank Staples ain't the only one concerned. Wish I was a fortune-teller fer a while. An' now fer the Testament. It has been so long since I have seen one that I'm blamed if I haven't nigh forgot what they're like."

He reached forward and drew the pamphlet toward him. It contained but a few pages, which were about three by six inches in size. The paper cover was yellow, and bore no inscription, printed or otherwise.

"Neither's there any title to it," the Rustler ejaculated as he proceeded with the examination. "Why, it ain't no Testament. I thought it quare if a sinner like Jim Bloker would be sportin' such a thing. It looks like a sort o' novel, only there ain't no headin'. Mebbe the printer forgot that? Funny, too."

He pondered over the singular fact for awhile; then, laying back upon the grass, he muttered:

"Bloker sed I must stay here, an' that settles that. So I s'pose I might as well read this 'ere novel an' see if the her'ine got spliced or not. Sometimes they don't come out that way, an' then it makes me feel mad enuff to kick the face off a full moon. Waal, here she goes—zam!" and opening the book, the young vagabond gave himself up to the perusal.

CHAPTER VII.

A QUEER TESTAMENT.

THE following was what Rustling Rob read:

Once upon a time, there dwelt in an Eastern hamlet a family, whom we will call Thrifty—for they were thrifty and well to-do, and that name will answer as well, if not better than any other.

There was of the family, father, mother, son and daughter, the latter being one of the fairest flowers that ever budded and blossomed upon the face of this earth. Her beauty was known far and wide, and this, with her sweetness of nature, won her many lovers.

All were treated alike, for she declined marrying any one, even though she received many most eligible offers, until at last one man came along and won her. The match was not regarded with favor by her parents, but they finally yielded, and the daughter became a bride, only to be borne away to a distant city.

Several years passed ere she was heard from, and then came the terrible news that she was insane, and locked up in an insane asylum.

The sorrowing father and son visited her husband, but from him got little satisfaction. She had become suddenly and violently deranged, he said, and hopelessly so, and he had provided a place for her in a private asylum, where she would have all the care and attention money could influence. There had been no issue from their union, he declared.

The father and son visited the asylum, but were told that, as she was undergoing the most careful treatment, it was imperative that they should not see her.

Thus they went home disappointed.

Month after month they visited the place, but each time they were refused, until finally they appealed to the law and gained their point.

But they found the realization of their worst expectations—she was insane beyond a doubt, and did not even know them. They learned, however, from a keeper, that there was little doubt in his mind but what the woman was perfectly sane, when first placed in the asylum.

The father and son had her removed to more congenial quarters and then, filled with revengeful remors, s'arted upon the trail of the husband. But they found that he had not only disposed of his business in the city where he had resided, but also that, after procuring a divorce from his imprisoned wife, he had fled for parts unknown.

That was all. The strange story, printed in coarse type, had ended as suddenly and abruptly as it had begun.

"Well, I'll be chawed up into clam-chowder, if it don't beat the Dutch," was Rustling Rob's comment when he had finished the perusal. "Either ther feller w'ot writ that he'd been eatin' mince-pie, or else his brain-food run out, an' he had to q'it an' tackle some other kind o' bizness. I wonder if Bloke tho't he was gittin' off a big joke, an' give me this book as a poke. Ha! ha! what a rhymester I would make."

For two hours the boy remained faithfully where Bloker had left him, but by the expiration of this time, he began to grow impatient.

"I'll be danged if this is fair," he muttered. "Like as not Bloker'll git as full as a b'il'd owl at the village, an' I'll have to hang out here all night. Oh, no. None of that for Robby. Bloker don't get very mad, and I guess I'll go over to The Cedars. Ef I can't git in among the big guns, mebbe I can peek thr'u' the fence an' see 'em bobbin' around."

To think was to act with him, and he arose and sauntered across the fields until he struck the dusty country road which wound around the base of Cemetery Hill and on to The Cedars.

He had not yet reached The Cedars when he heard the rattle of wheels, and a stylish barouche passed him, drawn by a pair of bays, and containing no one else than Deacon Hall, his wife and daughter.

Cleopatra was tastefully attired in a pretty white mull dress, festooned with flowers and ribbons, and, with her jaunty hat, her rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, was a perfect little beauty—at least so thought Rob.

She gave him a pleasant nod and smile as the carriage whirled by, and Rob threw her a kiss.

"Jemminy!" he ejaculated. "She's clear gal, that gal is. Nothin' stuck up ner conceity about her, an' I'll bet a collar-button to a cent she's stuck on me."

Suddenly remembering his unprepossessing appearance, however, he looked down at his tattered garments ruefully, in doubt about the matter.

"She ain't stuck on my togs, nohow," he concluded, logically. "It must be me, myself. Now if I only had the right sort o' a lay-out, I would be a reg'lar swell, but I'll be blazed if I'd keer to marry into that family while the old deacon holds the fort."

Reasoning thus, the lad tramped along and at last drew up near the stone wall that surrounded The Cedars, beginning and terminating at the river's edge.

As the top of the wall was about as high as his head, he had to seek out a place where a pile of stones on the exterior afforded him an opportunity for looking over.

The majority of the guests were at the tables, eating, although a few were still promenading about the grounds.

Among the latter Rob spied the dude, Valentine Vandervliet, with Miss Cleopatra Hall leaning graciously upon his arm, and looking confidently up into his face as she gayly chatted to him.

The dude had evidently succeeded in making a pronounced mash.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" was Rob's muttered ejaculation. "I'm a herring, if that don't make me feel jest like whoopin' out, reg'lar Injun fashion. Thet aire snoozer aire sportin' around my gal, an' Plucksy is takin' it all in, as though she liked it. Wait till they come this way, tho!"

Filled with excitement and boyish chagrin, Rob now mounted the wall, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the couple approaching.

They did not notice him, however, until they were close at hand, and cried out:

"Oh, you spider-legged dude!"

Both, then, looked quickly up, and Cleopatra uttered a glad cry:

"Oh! Rob, is it you? Why don't you come inside?"

"An' git kicked out? No, thank you. Where'd you pick up the skeleton?"

Plucks, as she chose to call herself, looked at her companion with a merry laugh.

"Oh! he's mashed on me, you know. Such sport! This is Mr. Valentine Vandervliet."

"Yas, I see. He looks like a mulle'n-stalk, grow'd up to seed."

"You are an impudent, dirty vagabond!" cried Vandervliet, furiously.

"An' you're a sick-lookin' 'rang-a-tang!" fired back Rob. "For five cents, I'd jump down there and make you swaller yourself. But, I say, Plucksy, old gal, you're sweet on me, ain't you?"

"Oh! you bet. Wait awhile there. Come 'long, Mr. Mash!"

And away she danced, pulling the dude with her, and both soon disappeared from view.

Rob remained on the wall.

"I wonder what she meant," he muttered. "I'm gosh-all-fired if I don't like her."

As his position was one not to be readily seen from the grounds, he was not molested.

The shadows of night soon began to gather, but the festivities did not end.

Myriads of strings of Chinese lanterns lit the grounds, and the band played with renewed energy for the entertainment of the guests.

Rob was beginning to think of returning toward the camp when he heard a noise below him, on the outside of the wall, and a voice called, softly—Cleopatra's voice, too:

"Rob! Rob! Are you there?"

"You bet," the boy replied, with alacrity, as he dropped from the wall. "Is it you, Plucksy, gal?"

"Yes, Rob. I am so glad you have waited," and she placed one hand confidingly on his shoulder. "I've been 'way to the farm-house, already. See, I've got my bundle. I am going to run away, Rob!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROBBERY.

JIM BLOKER, after leaving his young protege, went as straight as the road would take him toward the quiet little village of Rushville.

His face was dark and moody, and everything in his appearance went to show that he was disagreeably out of sorts.

In passing The Cedars he paused only long enough to glance into the grounds and note the apparent enjoyment of the guests—then passed on.

"Yas, let 'em have their fun while they may," he muttered. "I'll spile it for 'em directly."

He reached the village inn without incident, and took advantage of an opportunity to pour down a brimming glass of liquor, to which was added another, and still another, until his appetite was satisfied.

Then he inquired his way to the village bank, and set out toward it.

On his arrival there he found that it had closed its doors for that day's business.

He was in the act of retreating toward his camp, when the door of the bank opened, and two men came out.

They were Frank Staples, the cashier, and Algernon Agatha, the owner of the bank.

Quickly concealing himself, Bloker watched them with gleaming eyes.

They sauntered down toward the tree-fringed river, the bank-owner's gesticulations, now and then, going to show that he was giving Staples some sort of a lecture, whether it were mild or otherwise.

"I wonder what's the deficklity?" Bloker

muttered. "Something's gone wrong. I'll try and find out."

By dodging stealthily along, it was an easy matter for him to follow the two gentlemen, and when they halted on the river-bank, he was concealed but a few steps away, behind a clump of bushes, from where he could hear and see without necessarily being seen.

"Well, now," Agatha was saying, "the matter has got to be settled. You have proven yourself an efficient clerk and cashier, or I should not hesitate a minute about discharging you. As I have previously told you, my daughter can never be anything to you, and the sooner you accept of that fact, sensibly, the sooner you will increase my respect for you. No doubt Agnes's loveliness may have had its effect on you, but I assure you, sir, she is too far above you, both intellectually and socially, for you ever to cherish the slightest hope of her being aught but a stranger to you."

Sternly and precisely did the owner of The Cedars speak, and no one could doubt but that he meant every word he said.

Frank Staples heard him through, his face slightly pale, and a dissatisfied gleam in his eyes.

"I presume it is your intention to sacrifice her to that brainless shadow I knocked down?" he spoke up, bitterly.

"Certainly, sir, if I so choose. It concerns you not, sir, in the least, regarding the future disposition I may make of my daughter's hand."

"On the contrary, sir, it does concern me."

"Indeed! How?"

"In this much—that although it may never be my happy lot to call her mine, she shall never marry a milksop sickling like your guest, young Vandervliet!"

"Ha, you talk boldly, young man, for one in your menial position. Check that tongue of yours at once, or I shall yet be forced to discharge you."

"Do so if you like. As I told you before, I am no slave to the power of any man's money, and I don't give five coppers whether I work for you or not, as you are not the only man in the world!"

Agatha grew livid with anger, and seemed about to break forth into a torrent of abuse; but he checked himself, and turned impatiently on his heel.

"Enough of this nonsense. I have forbidden you to speak to the girl again. Disobey at your peril."

And turning abruptly, he strode back into the village.

Frank Staples gazed sullenly after him for a moment, and then threw himself upon the grass, his head supported by his hand and elbow.

"It's fate," he muttered. "I suppose I never ought to have aspired to such a thing as winning her for my wife, because of the difference between our social spheres in life. But hang it, faint heart never won fair lady, the saying is, and I'll not give up yet. Agatha understands about how much I fear him, and the only way for me is to be independent, and if he don't like my style, he can adopt a new fashion pl te. Agnes shall be mine yet, for I have every confidence that she will be true to me."

His day's work being over, he lay idly watching the waters sweep by, his mind busily occupied with thoughts of Agnes.

By and by he grew drowsy, and it was not long ere his heavy breathing proclaimed that he was fast asleep.

Then it was that Jim Bloker crept out from his place of concealment, a wicked gleam in his dark orbs. His very movements were snakish and evil, it seemed, and he reached the sleeper's side without awakening him.

"Yes, 'tis he," he muttered, gazing down into Staples's face. "He's the feller as arter be able to tell us whar old Brandt is. Here's my chance to knife him, but I ain't o' that turn o' mind just now. Ther's better fish in the stream than has been caught yet, an' I'm goin' to angle fer 'em. Then, too, it aire twice possible that this feller don't know whar the capt'in is, anyhow."

He took a half-pint bottle and a sponge from his pocket with a quiet chuckle.

The bottle was filled with chloroform, and with the liquid he thoroughly saturated the sponge, and held it close to the cashier's nose.

In a few seconds Staples was drugged beyond immediate awakening, and rolled helplessly over upon his back.

"Good!" was Bloker's comment. "It could scarcely be better. Before beginning my business transactions with Mr. Algernon Agatha, I will secure myself against accident, by feather-

ing my nest with a few of his legal-tenders. Ha! ha!"

With the skill of a professional pickpocket he went through young Staples's pockets, and at last found what he wanted—the keys to the bank.

"Now for the money!" he muttered. "The cuss will sleep until my return, I reckon, and when he returns to consciousness, the bank will be robbed and the keys in his own pocket. Who else, of course, than he, can therefore be suspected? No one, I'll guarantee."

Dragging Frank behind the clump of bushes, where he might not so readily be discovered, Bloker then set out for the bank.

At that time in the afternoon the little village was usually dull and drowsy, and but few people were to be seen upon the street.

Therefore, by skillful maneuvering, Bloker succeeded in reaching the bank and gaining an entrance through the side door, without trouble or discovery.

Once inside the bank, he entertained no fears and went at his job leisurely.

The great safe in which the money was locked up was after all but an ordinary affair, and not supplied with a time-lock, as many city banks are.

After a minute inspection of the knob, Bloker took a small sheet of paper from his pocket, and went carefully over the contents, which was an indiscriminate mass of figures and fractions thereof.

"Ah!" he exclaimed at last, his face lighting up with an evil smile, "it's a cold day when Jim Bloker gits left, you bet!"

He knelt by the safe and turned the knob communicating with the combination-lock several times; then with a sudden jerk, pulled the ponderous door of the safe open.

To unlock the inner door was the work of but a few minutes, and before him lay the array of drawers and pigeon-holes containing the moneyed capital and valuable papers of the bank.

The latter he did not molest, but he counted out the former with a huge degree of satisfaction.

"Fifty thousand, clean cash!" he muttered, "barrin' out the gold and silver, which aire too cumbersome to handle. Thankee, Algernon Agatha. I couldn't 'a' done better had I attempted to bargain wi' you. This 'ere swag, together wi' my forthcoming revenge, will make me the happiest tramp in America. Now, too, while you go on wi' yer festivities at The Cedars, I'll stow away your legal-tenders, have a quiet smoke, and await for darkness."

By the time he had the money pocketed, however, he changed his mind.

"Staples might waken," he muttered, "and raise a row, on missing the key. I must return it to him."

Leaving the bank as stealthily as he had entered it, he returned to the river and restored the keys to Frank Staples's pocket without arousing him.

CHAPTER IX.

BLOKER "DROPS" TO A GAME.

DURING the evening, several hours after Mr. Agatha's interview with young Staples, he and Mrs. Senator Vandervliet sat in the private parlor of the owner of The Cedars, engaged partly in conversation and partly in watching the dancers through a wide oriel window, near which they were seated.

The doors and windows of the parlor were open, and so, of course, there could be no impropriety in Mr. Agatha and Mrs. Vandervliet being alone together.

"And now," Mrs. V. was saying, "let us understand ourselves, my dear Agatha. There has been such a confusion that we've not had an opportunity to say a word in private. There is no one about to overhear us now, and we can speak freely."

"True," Agatha assented. "In the first place, now that you are here, how long do you propose to remain?"

"As long as you do, my dear. You know the two main objects that brought me here—that is, the union of our two loving hearts in marriage, and likewise the marriage of our children."

"It seems to me you are unduly eager," the gentleman observed, quietly. "An immediate marriage would be apt to create comment, especially as regards ourselves."

"Pshaw! never fear for that! Delays are dangerous, and I am sure, in our case, they are quite useless. I have set my heart on ruling here as Mrs. Agatha, and if you disappoint me—"

"What then?"

"Why need you ask? I fancy you know enough about me to know that I will bear no trifling. I am a woman of the world, and have set my affections on you, and have you I will in spite of any objections you may make. Do you understand that?"

"My powers of comprehension are not very dull, I assure you. If you do not succeed in accomplishing your purpose, you will make me trouble, eh?"

"Exactly. You are powerless to truthfully say I cannot do so. Supposing the public were to know that the distinguished gentleman, Mr. Algernon Agatha, of The Cedars, was the chief of a notorious band of counterfeiters, who have their headquarters in a certain cem—"

She did not finish what she might have said, for his hand closed tightly over her mouth.

"Curse you, hush!" he breathed, fiercely. "Do you not know that even walls sometimes have ears?"

"You are rude. You provoked me into saying what I did," she gasped, when he removed his hand. "You had best never lay violent hands on me again, sir."

"Tut! tut! I only did it to prevent you from making both you and myself ridiculous. Let it drop. It is my intention to let it drop, providing you do. It is also my intention to marry you, if you keep your part of our original agreement."

"Have I ever declined to do so? Oh, no. The moment after I am Mrs. Algernon Agatha, if you like, I will hand you the mortgage."

"Have you it with you?"

"Right in my pocket. But you need not try to steal it, even if it is unrecorded. I am amply able to take care of it myself."

"I am not professionally a thief. But one word only appears to bring on another. So let's change the topic. I fear I shall have a difficult time in forcing Agnes to marry your son. She heartily detests him, and for my part I can not see but what she is sensible, for he is without exception about the poorest apology for a man that I have encountered for a long time."

"Why, how can you say so? I am sure Valentine is the model of politeness, and propriety."

"Undoubtedly, but just at that point all ends. He has no stamina, no self-reliance, no manly traits of character. I know, if I were a young woman, that he would be the last one I would think of marrying."

"Nevertheless, your daughter must marry him. You promised it, and you know what the result will be if you go back on your word."

"Well, let matters rest as they are to-night. To-morrow, if you insist, we can make some definite arrangements. And, now, as there is to be a certain meeting at midnight, I must leave you, to perfect a few preparations."

"What is the object of the meeting?"

"To distribute stock to the men. It is perilous to have much on hand, which there is at present—enough to last for two months. I shall wind up matters to-night, so that there will be a vacation among the band for several months. It won't do to keep the men out of the harvest-field, doing nothing, as it may arouse suspicion. If I am asked for, I am gone to the village, in answer to an important message."

And, taking his hat, Mr. Agatha left the house.

Mrs. Vandervliet did not leave her seat at the window, but sat staring out at the revelers, an impatient look upon her face, as her polished slipper tapped the carpet.

She seemed indulging in a reverie of an unpleasant nature.

She uttered a stifled cry, however, when she saw a man seated upon the chair Agatha had recently vacated, who held a revolver leveled at her heart.

"Silence, or death!" he said, grimly, and she was sensible enough to make no other outcry.

The man was Jim Bloker, tramp.

He came down to business, too.

"I was listening to your interesting conversation," he said, gruffly, "and was not a little surprised when your identity became known to me. Why, Maggie, how long is it since you got to sporting around as Mrs. Senator Vandervliet?"

She uttered a gasp, partly of anger, partly of surprise.

"Sir! I do not know you. Begone, or I will call the servants."

"And they in turn would have to call in the u. t., and order a box for you. U. t. stands for undertaker," he said, significantly. "So you don't know me, eh, Maggie? Why, I'll bet different! When you used to be Mrs. Maggie

Spicer, you knew me as your obedient spouse, Jack Spicer. And the boy—bless his liver—he's grown up to look just like his pa."

"Heaven forbid!" Mrs. Vandervliet exclaimed. "In God's name, what brings you here, man?"

"Man? Now that's a pleasant way of addressing your hubby, ain't it?—real nice! What brings me here? Well, several various things—one in particular, to see what the racket is you're up to. Goin' to rope in Agatha?"

"What does it concern you, sir, whether I am or not?" she snapped.

"Oh! I'm not at all concerned. Glad, tho', to see you prosper. You an' Agatha will make a good team—better than ever you an' I did, I'll swear. You was allus too deep fer me in downright smartness. The senatress dodge, tho', is rather thin. Agatha can't be very well versed in politics, or he'd know that poor dead-and-gone old Vandervliet never existed, as far as the senate is concerned."

"What of it, as long as it works? After I rule here, what's the difference?"

"You intend to put on the trowsers, then, eh?"

The arch-schemer shrugged her fat shoulders for answer.

"You're a gud one!" Bloker commented. "I dare say, after you get persesh, you'll kill off the fatted calf, an' let ther prodigal, which aire me, return?"

"I hardly fancy I should consider you, who deserted me, and left me to shift for myself. Indeed, I am positive we were never intended for each other."

"Well, that may be. Can't say as I shed tear my hair ef ye war to tell me ye never did love me. Queens an' hearts aire a bad investment, anyhow, 'ca'se you've got to whack up the diamonds to stand a ghost of a show. But, I say, I must tear myself away. Never tho't it would be my luck to drop in on a quiet game like this. How flush aire ye?"

"How much do you want, to make yourself scarce and mind your own business?"

"All you've got. I'm a hog, I am!"

"No need to tell me that. I became aware of the fact long ago. But you'll get less than you expect. I'm short just now."

"Oh! I dare say you can be liberal with me. It won't pay you to be otherwise!"

His positive mauner of speech was an indirect threat, and she knew it.

Secretly in a furious passion, she was outwardly as calm as though there was nothing whatever to ruffle her temper.

She took a handsome purse from her pocket, and counted out a roll of bills.

"There are five hundred dollars!" she said, coldly. "That's all I have to give you at present, and I shall expect you to mind your own business."

"Not being in any business, just at present, I shall not even have to do that," he said, on receiving the money. "As your success is identical with mine, you can rely on me. I will now bid you *au revoir*. Will you kiss me, angelic Maggie?"

He did not await her reply, but threw his arms about her neck, kissed her several times, and then, with a triumphant chuckle, glided from the room.

"Curse him! curse him!" she hissed, when he was gone. "Oh, how I hate and loathe him, and knowing it seems to give him the most intense satisfaction. Why does he come here, at this most inopportune time, when he may be a death-blow to my interests? I have not seen him before in years. He has found out what I am playing for, and he will extort money from me without mercy—unless I can manage him. Perhaps I can do that. In his case, bulldozing would have as little effect as pouring water on an oil fire. I must adopt some other plan. Perhaps an affectionate game would work better. I can but try it and fail, anyhow."

CHAPTER X.

THE GIRL FUGITIVE.

RUSTLING ROB looked his astonishment, when he heard the words of Cleopatra Hall.

"Goin' to run away?" he echoed. "Where?"

"Heaven only knows, Rob—I don't. But, I am going to run away—oh! away off—anywhere, so as to get away from here."

"Well, well! What's the kick up? Soured on the old folks?"

"Yes—sourer than vinegar. But, come along, out of hearing, and I'll tell you. I expect they'll raise a row, and start a search for me, pretty soon."

Hardly knowing what to do, Rob took her bundle and led the way along the tree-shaded

river-bank, until they were some distance from The Cedars, then a halt was made.

"Now, sit down and reel out. Blamed if you haven't got me all excited."

"Oh! I scarcely know how to tell you," Cleo said, struggling bravely to keep from crying. "You see, after you left, I got an awful whipping—the worst I ever got. My back is all full of cuts. But I stood it, you bet, because I remembered how brave you was. After that, I was locked up in a room, an' I listened and heard the old man and old woman quarrelin'."

"Ah!"

"Yes—they were havin' it hot and heavy. The old woman said it wasn't accordin' to religion, and the deacon said 'To a hot place with religion! He knew his business.' Then, ma'am said: 'Tain't like it was our own child. We're paid to keep her, and we orter use her right.'

"Then dad—or the deacon—said: 'I don't care a continental cuss for that. The pay for her keepin' hasn't come, and if it don't come pretty soon, I'll chuck her into the county poor-house!'"

"Well! well! This is wuss'n the novel I read, to-day. So they ain't your parents?"

"Oh! no! no! Oh! what shall I do? I can never stay there another day. Oh! I am an outcast—a nobody, whom some one has all these years been paying to keep. I wish I was dead."

"Git out! Ye'r talkin' foolish, now. Did yo hear 'em say any more?"

"No! The old woman broomsticked the old man out of doors, then, and made him hitch up the team. Oh! you are but a boy, but you are the only one I have to look to as a friend. Can't you help me?"

"If I can't an' don't, I hope I may be turned into a skunk. Now, jest hold yer hosses a minute, an' let me reflect. Ye shan't go back to them, *that's flat*. I'm a boy, tho' I don't know my own age, but ye can bet I'm some on my muscle. D'ye know of any good hidin'-place, for a few days, 'til I can have a chance to get my thinkers together?"

"No place only a country school-house, a couple of miles away. It's shut up now, as it is vacation time!"

"Capital! Couldn't be better. You're deader 'an a door-nail! D'ye hear?"

"What? I do not understand you!"

"I say you're dead; by which I mean—that every one will calculate you're dead, when we leave here."

"I wish you would explain, Rob. I really do not understand what you mean, yet."

"Well, ye see, when we leave here, you can leave a piece o' yer duds, ye know, so's they'll find it, an' a note tellin' 'em you've drowned yerself. They'll guv up the search then, and erect a tombstun ter yer mem'ry."

"But that would be awful, Rob. It would be telling a story."

"Git out! No such a thing! Ye jest write on a piece of paper, like this: 'Deacon Hall, I overheard what you said about me to your wife. You will have to answer for what your words have driven me to do.' Then sign yer handle, an' ye're all right."

"You are a genius, Rob."

"Dunno about that, Plucksy, but I ain't so slow as a hog that won't drive, anyhow. Now, here's a piece o' paper, and a pencil, an' ye can write it. Better be extradishus, too, fer we don't know what minnit the gang will be lookin' fer ye."

The message was soon written.

"Now, what piece of clothing shall I leave behind?" Cleo asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, one of your socks will do!"

"But, Rob, girls don't wear socks. You mean stockings."

"Well, what's the odds? Hurry up about it, anyhow."

Cleo hastened to obey, and soon announced her readiness to depart; but just then the sound of an approaching脚步 reached their hearing.

"Squat!" Rob whispered, pulling her quickly behind a cluster of trees. "To attempt to run will be out o' the question now. Our only show is to keep quiet."

While the two crouched in anxious anticipation the footsteps approached, and at length a man's advancing figure was perceptible.

"It's Bloker," Rob breathed. "Lie low. He ain't after us, nohow, but he's got some other game."

The chief of tramps soon halted within a few yards of the tree, and glanced sharply around him.

"I reckon this is as good a place as any," he said, aloud. "They'd little think o' searchin' here. Ho! ho! it's a cold day when Jim Bloker don't know his P's and Q's, you bet."

He knelt upon the grass, and took out a large clasp-knife, with which he cut out a square piece of sod, about five by six inches. This he laid carefully on one side, and with knife and hands began to excavate the dirt, carefully, and place it in his hat, so as to leave no traces of his work.

When the hole was of sufficient size he produced a small bundle, well wrapped in oil-cloth, and placed it in the cavity, which it fitted very nicely. He then returned the block of sod back to its original position, and pressed it firmly down.

"There!" he said, with evident satisfaction. "It's safer there than in the National Bank. And now there's other work to be done."

He arose and started back toward The Cedars.

When he was beyond hearing it required the Rustler but a minute to possess himself of the buried package.

"What is it, Rob?" Cleo asked, anxiously.

"Swag!" the boy returned, sententiously. "But you keep mum. Not a word of this to anyone. Bloker is playin' a big game of some sort, and shoot me for a hedge-hog if I don't take a hand myself. If the keerds run all right there's likely to be some big developments. But come, Plucksy. Show me the way to the schoolus' you spoke of, an' I'll see if I can't git ye snugly hid, until I git a chance to provide somewhat better for you."

Willingly and trustfully the girl took his hand, and they hurried away across lots, toward the old red school-house, which offered the only place of concealment for the fugitive for the present.

"Oh, we'll fix 'em!" Rob assured. "You'll be safe, an' ef I don't nose out somethin' about who and what you are, you can call me a sun-downer!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE COUNTERFEITERS.

MORE than one trouble was preying uneasily upon the mind of Algernon Agatha, and when he left The Cedars after his interview with Mrs. Vandervliet, his brows were knitted in an ominous scowl.

"Curse the luck I am having!" he muttered. "Matters are crowding in on me unpleasantly close, when I could most desire to the contrary. Bloker's significant note nettles me. If he is the man I believe him to be, he means trouble. It will not do for me to take a positive stand against him, until I am certain who he is. I'll soon find out."

He went direct to the village, and to the telegraph-office, where he found the operator about closing up for the night.

"Not yet!" Agatha said, gruffly. "You must send a message and get an answer for me. Here are five dollars."

As this was something the operator did not see every day, he at once sat down at his instrument.

Agatha then wrote out the following, and gave it to him:

"DR. DEAQUE, — street, N. Y.:—

"Report instantly how matters stand."

"A. AGATHA."

"Send that through with the order that an answer must be sent back to-night!" the owner of The Cedars ordered, and then began to pace impatiently up and down the dingy little room.

Bailey, the operator, hastened to rattle off the message, and then tipped back in his chair to await the answer.

Fully two hours passed, and Agatha preserved his patience to a wonderful degree, ere a click of the instrument announced that the answer was coming.

There was a succession of clicks, and Bailey's pencil moved rapidly as he wrote down the message, and then handed it to Agatha.

There were but a few words.

"ALGERNON AGATHA, Rushville:—

"Was released, three weeks ago, pronounced cured. Don't know where gone." DR. D."

Agatha's teeth went together with a click not unlike such as the telegraph instrument had made, and a grayish sort of pallor swept over his features.

"As I suspected!" he uttered, under his breath, and crunching the message in his hand, he strode out into the night, leaving Bailey staring after him.

Agatha did not return to The Cedars, but

strode down to the river, and thence along its banks toward the grim old graveyard on the bluff.

Frank Staples, just awakened from the effects of the inhalation of chloroform, saw the gentleman pass, and opened his eyes more widely.

"There's something up!" he muttered, getting upon his feet, "or Agatha wouldn't be down here. Ha! how my head swims and aches. How foolish I was to sleep there in the damp till so late an hour as this."

Instinctively he felt in his pocket for his keys to the bank, and felt relieved when he found them there, safe.

"I've a notion to follow Agatha and see what he is up to!" he muttered. "There must be something unusual on the tapis."

Hastily bathing his forehead in the stream, he then stole swiftly and cautiously along in the direction the owner of The Cedars had gone.

Ere long he caught a glimpse of Agatha, and then slackened his pace, just enough to keep him in sight.

His head ached terribly, but his curiosity was fully aroused, and he was resolved, if possible, to learn what Agatha's errand was, at such a late hour—for it was nearly midnight.

Continuing along the river-bank with an easy stride, Agatha at length turned into the driveway leading up to the cemetery, whose white marble slabs looked grim and spectral, in the starlight.

Without the least hesitation he entered this village of the dead, and struck into a drive which wound abruptly down the steep side of the bluff overlooking the river.

Half-way down this road was a sort of landing, then the road continued on, and ascended to the cemetery above, again.

Opening into the bowels of the bluff, from off the landing, was the family vault of the Agathas.

A marble entrance, with iron door, looked out toward the dark, silent-flowing river.

It was an odd, yet picturesque place for a tomb, and had been designed and built under the supervision of the present owner of The Cedars.

When he arrived at the vault door he inserted a key in the lock, opened the portal, and, entering, closed and locked it, at the same time removing the key.

A lamp was dimly burning upon the top of a broken chair, but by its light it could be seen that tiers of coffins occupied either side of the small chamber.

At the further end of the vault was a rough box, or outside case, coffin-shaped, which had no lid.

To this Algernon Agatha at once proceeded and stretched himself out in it.

An observer would have been impressed with the idea that the owner of The Cedars intended to make a night of it with the dead!

But such was not the case.

No sooner was he comfortably ensconced than with his right hand he touched a secret spring and began to sink downward, taking the bottom of the box with him.

In a few seconds he came to a stop, and getting off the board it glided noiselessly upward to its former position.

Agatha was now in an intensely dark, subterranean passage, through which he groped cautiously.

In a few minutes he pushed open a noiseless door which admitted him to a sort of vestibule, off of which opened a large apartment.

This place clearly had been made by man, as the ceiling was planked and supported from caving in by strong timbers.

The size of the place was about thirteen by twenty feet, and was occupied by five men, all clad in calico gowns and wearing full masks.

The room was lighted by lanterns suspended to the planks above, and scattered about were the different things constituting a counterfeiter's paraphernalia.

The men were seated at a rude table, playing cards, when Agatha entered, but looked up and nodded when they saw him.

"Ah! all on deck, eh?" he said, pleasantly. "I am pleased to see you so punctual: Finish your game, boys, and we'll get down to business."

"Business always before pleasure," replied one who appeared to be in command, as he threw down his cards. "We are ready if you are, boss."

"Very well, Curly. Let's hear your report. Is the work all completed?"

"It is. The new plate is the best we have ever executed, and not one out of ten thousand will suspect the bill of not being genuine."

"That is drawing it rather large, I fear. However, let me take a look at an impression."

Curly went to a chest and returned with a package of fresh, crisp ten-dollar notes. There must have been several thousand in the package.

Agatha extracted one of the notes, put on his glasses, and gave it a minute examination, occupying several minutes.

"It is indeed a masterpiece," he said, finally, "and ought to pass without trouble. Nevertheless, the utmost care must be exercised in working off this batch, if we hope to continue in the business. Have you the stock on hand that I ordered?"

"We have, sir."

"Then you will have a harvest-field vacation for awhile. The stock will last until early fall, at least. I shall send the 'shovers' mostly to distant parts, having ordered them to be ready to-morrow. The New Orleans races will absorb a pile of the stuff, and as fast as the cash comes in you will all receive your percentage."

"We haven't seen much o' the returns from last batch, boss," Curly suggested, while the other men "abemed."

"I was just about to speak of that," Agatha said. "I have the money in the bank, and will give you each a check for two thousand dollars, payable on presentation to my cashier. I don't want you to think for an instant that I would cheat you out of your pay."

"Oh, no—of course not," Curly hastened to say. "Will you dispatch any of us?"

"No—at least, not this time. To prevent your idleness from attracting suspicion, I want you to go to work in the harvest field to-morrow. Of course you can suit yourselves about the amount of work you accomplish. Now, while I write out the checks, make five complete parcels of the notes, and then unite them into one."

His order was promptly obeyed, and when he had finished writing out the checks, a compact package, a couple of feet square, was in readiness.

"I s'pose we'll have no trouble in drawing these 'ere?" Curly demanded, as he received the checks and distributed them.

"None whatever," Mr. Agatha assured. "I have over fifty thousand dollars in my bank to meet demands. Therefore, you need not have the least uneasiness. I must be going now. Remember and lock everything up safely when you leave, and do not come to this vicinity again, under any circumstances, until you get orders from me. Two of you can now come and help me up!"

Inside of five minutes Algernon Agatha was some little distance from the cemetery, carrying with him the package of counterfeit money, which his several private agents were to "shove" in various parts of the country, in exchange for good money.

And yet Algernon Agatha was generally looked upon as the model of honorable and upright men of the times!

CHAPTER XII.

RACHEL.

As Rustling Rob had concluded, on leaving the spot where Bloker had bade him remain, he would have had a monotonous siege of waiting for the tramp captain's return.

It was long past the midnight hour when Bloker might have been seen lurking about the immediate vicinity of The Cedars. The lights in the mansion were mostly out, and the guests had retired for the night.

Bloker's movements seemed to indicate that he wanted to make sure that no one was still prowling about the grounds.

When satisfied on this point, he scaled the stone wall, and moved cautiously toward the little boat-house, at the lower end of the lawn. Arriving there, he found the building locked, but with him it was a trifling matter to pick the lock and gain entry. Then selecting one of the best boats in the house, he was soon rowing out upon the dark surface of the river, which at this point was both deep and wide.

Instead of rowing with the current, he headed the boat directly up-stream, and laid to the oars manfully.

The little craft was light, and under his strong stroke fairly flew over the water.

For a full hour he rowed thus, and when he paused the perspiration streamed from his face, and he was in the heart of a gloomy district, a number of miles from his starting-point. Heavily-timbered hills arose high on either hand.

Bloker evidently had been there before, for,

after glancing about sharply, he pulled directly toward the shore, at a point where stood an isolated shanty which had at some time been the abode of a wood-cutter. A light was burning in the window now, however, and Bloker's face lit up with a pleased look of anticipation as he neared the landing.

Drawing his boat partly up on the shore, he hastened toward the door, which was opened just as he reached it, and he entered.

The interior was furnished with but a few rough articles, and it was a poor place of abode at best.

The person who had admitted Bloker was a woman.

She was thin, and yet stately of bearing. Evident it was that she had once possessed a form of matchless grace. Long suffering, however, had done its work.

Her face, once of marked beauty, was still extremely prepossessing, with a fine mouth, and lustrous dark eyes; but her hair was silvery white, and there were traces of suffering betrayed in an occasional line of her face.

She was plainly clad, yet looked neat and attractive.

She greeted Bloker warmly, and he, in turn, kissed her upon the cheek.

"Oh! I am so glad you came, Ferris," she said, setting him a chair. "I was afraid something had happened."

"An' so that has, sis!" he said, gruffly, but in a better-natured tone than usually characterized his manner of speech.

"Oh! what? what is it, brother? Is there no hope?"

"Of your foolish wish? No! and a thousand times glad am I for it. I've news for you, tho', sis—far different than I expected to bring you. But, first of all, have you given careful thought to what I asked you to consider?"

"Yes, brother, and I still cling to the assertion I made when I was restored to my senses: We had two children—a boy and a girl. We had, also, an adopted babe, the child of a widower, who went to Brazil, and who was a friend of my husband. He acquired a sudden fortune and returned, when my husband murdered him, hoping to get his money. He found, however, that the money was nearly all placed in a fund, payable to his child, when it was of age. I saw my husband commit the crime, and fearing I would betray him, he caused me to be placed in a private mad-house, and there my reason actually did leave me. Whatever became of the children, I do not know."

"There is not a doubt in my mind but what we are on the right trail," Bloker said, grimly. "Indeed, so positive am I of it, that I'd risk my life on't."

"You believe that the Algernon Agatha you told me of is my sinful husband?"

"I do, most emphatically. There are many things I propose to let you into, too, but you must promise to leave everything to me!"

"How can I do otherwise, dear brother? You are the only one I have to look to now, and but for your unflagging interest I should not be a sane woman at this hour."

"Very true, sis. But, let me tell you: It was when we received the intimation that you were sane when he placed you in the mad-house that my father and I took up the trail. We bound ourselves, by a terrible oath, to unravel the whole business, so far as possible, did the Wise One above give us life, strength and freedom."

"Our beginning was in New York. It was our field of work, for a considerable period. We found that Eustace Stenwick, your husband, had disposed of his business, at a sacrifice, procured a divorce, and fled. Where, we found no possible means of ascertaining, but we were as vigilant as foxes, and as tireless as beavers. It was months before we found another encouraging clew."

"Then, like a ray of sunshine came a change. We learned that a man answering Eustace Stenwick's description had adopted a male child to a family in Mercer street, who, we ascertained, had emigrated to the West. To what part, we had no means of finding out. All we discovered was that the family's name was Rollins."

"Well, the next clew we got was that a belle of Baltimore was about to marry a former New York business man, who had been unfortunate through a previous marriage, by his wife becoming hopelessly insane. This we saw in an old paper, and I followed the clew. It was a long search. I found that the marriage had already taken place, and the bride and her husband, a Mr. Edmund Stanhope, had gone to Europe, to pick out a permanent home. I also eked out the information that a child had accompanied them."

"Our father went abroad, and searched through the European countries, for five years, while I remained behind to see that you were cared for. After five years he came back, thoroughly disheartened, and for a time we literally gave up the search. One or the other of us, however, always kept on the tramp about the country, in hopes of finding some clew, and dad amassed a good bit of wealth, while, for my part, what I didn't spend on you, I spent on whisky."

"Well, a year ago, dad suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, while the gang was camping below here. All search failed to find him, and I was notified that one Frank Staples was suspected of having murdered him."

"When the news came, the prospects of your recovery were so great that I disliked to leave you. So I ordered the gang to search for both father and Staples. In spare moments, I came to the vicinity of father's disappearance, and made inquiries. I became satisfied father had been murdered, and could reasonably suspect no one else but Staples, until something occurred to me:

"This Agatha's name was in every one's mouth. He was a great man. He owned a great estate. He entertained distinguished guests, and did the thing up brown in general."

"Then the idea occurred to me—'why not see who the man really is?' I began first by making cautious inquiries. If anything ever pops into my noddle I make a point to consider it."

"I found that Algernon Agatha had not always held the reins at The Cedars. His father had been there, a number of years before. I found, also, that Agatha, Jr., had formerly been in business in the East, and had married a wife, now several months deceased, in Baltimore."

"This satisfied me. I needed no further proof. Yet, I found, too, that, years ago he had taken his bride to Europe. Algernon Agatha, the proud son of his father, is the Eustace, who once won you, my sister, and afterward consigned you to the mad-house. And yet, after all his sins, you would go back to the monster! Rachel, you're not sound yet."

"Oh! brother! brother! do not say that. I do not want to go back to him. I hate him, and only want my rights, and my children."

"An' ye shall have 'em, too, sis, or it will be a mighty queer affair. He's got one o' the children now—a young lady, called Agnes. He's goin' to try to make her marry a young snob who parts his hair in the middle, and calls his mother ma! I'll put a stop to that sort o' thing though, you bet."

"Oh! yes, do, I beg? Is there no way I can see her brother?"

"Of course not. All you've got to do is to stay right here and take it easy, and wait the developments your big brother will be sure to fetch about as fast as possible. I'd tell you more, but haven't time now. I must get back to camp before daylight comes, as I borrowed my boat. Perhaps I'll come again to-morrow night. At any rate, have no fears but what everything will come out in your favor."

He kissed her then affectionately and took his departure.

As he sprang into the boat and pulled out into the stream a grim laugh escaped him.

"Yes, I'll make Algernon Eustace Stenwick Agatha remember the country boy he used to snub with his fine airs when he came to see my sister. I'll make him feel the powerful grip I have on him, or my name ain't Bloker."

"Which, by ther way, I shed judge it were not?" cried a cool voice.

Bloker looked around.

On the seat directly back of him, with mouth literally stretched from ear to ear in a grin was the Tramp's Protege.

His wet garments proclaimed that he had just crawled out of the water.

"Oh, it's me!" he cried. "Cl'ar case of flesh an' bones. Didn't expect me, eh?"

"No. How came you here?"

"By precisely ther same steam an' sweat that you did, old pard. Ther only diff'rence was, you rode in your golden chariot like a king, while I war content to hang on behind and let my feet drag."

"How dared you follow me? Where did you see me first?"

"On the river. Sez, I, here's for a good swim wi'out any fizical exertion, an' so hitched on behind."

"You saw me go to the shanty, you young whelp?"

"On course!"

"And you listened outside the door and heard what was said? Don't ye lie, now, fer ef I ketch ye lyin' I'll break every bone in your body."

"Then you won't wallop me if I own up?"

"No."

"Well, I heard the hull bizness."

"You did? Well, I'm glad of it. Hereafter I'll take you into my plans, as you're a shrewd young rat. How much do you understand of what you heard?"

"Oh, clear from A to Z. Plain-as the nose on my face. But ye kin count on me. I'm mum as a butterfly!"

Bloker nodded and rowed on in silence, a faint smile lurking in under his mustache.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

THE many events of that busy night, have not yet all been chronicled.

After following Agatha to the cemetery, and seeing him disappear in the vault, about an hour after that, Frank Staples was lurking within the inclosure of the grounds at The Cedars.

Why he was there he scarcely knew himself, except that he was there in hopes of seeing Agnes. Lights were yet burning in some of the upper rooms of the mansion, but it was evident that the guests had retired to rest.

Staples lurked within the shadow of the trees for some time, to satisfy himself well on that point before venturing closer.

At length he approached the southern corner of the mansion, and gazed up at an open oriel window, out of which came the dim glow of a low light.

Putting his fingers to his lips he sent forth the exact imitation of a tree-toad's cry, and repeated it several times. In a few moments Agnes came to the window and peered down.

"Is it you, Frank?" she asked, in a scarcely audible tone.

"Yes. Dress yourself and come down," he replied.

She at once disappeared, and he drew back under cover.

In five minutes she came out of the house, enveloped in a waterproof, and the lovers were locked in each other's embrace.

"Oh, Frank! how glad I am you came! I was half-expecting you, and so I did not retire," Agnes said, "Let's get away from the house, for I am not sure that papa is in yet."

"We will row out on the river then."

"No! no! I am afraid of water at night!"

"Well, then, I'll tell you of a good place to go. No place could please me better."

"Where?"

"To the minister's."

"Oh, you surprise me! You don't mean it, do you, Frank?"

"I never was more in earnest in my life. It stands this way, pat: Your father is determined that you shall marry no one but that dude, and I am equally determined that you shall. Go with me, dear, become my wife, and they cannot part us."

"But, oh! papa would be so angry!"

"What of it? He'll have ample time to get over his huff."

"Oh, Frank! I—I hardly know what to say. Do you really, really want me so much?"

"Well, if I really, really didn't, you can bet I'd not ask this of you, pet. So come along."

"But, Frank! The minister wouldn't marry us at this time of night. He would think something wrong—and you know how set he is in his ways."

"I'll unset him, though," Frank responded, dryly. "I know Parson Potter as a brick knows an Irishman. He knows me, too. Maybe I wasn't at a certain city, during a clerical convention, and maybe I didn't drop into a little poker room, and find the parson playing for all he was worth! Shrewd old sharper, too. So come along."

Agnes no longer hesitated.

They reached the village in due time, and Frank rapped peremptorily on the door of the parson's house.

Directly an up-stairs window was hoisted and a night-capped head popped out.

"Who is there at this unseemly hour, and what is wanted?" a deep, sepulchral voice demanded.

"A king and queen of hearts that want to get united in that matrimonial game which sometimes calls poker rules into play," Frank laughingly replied. "In other words, parson, we want to get married."

"Sir, I cannot perform so momentous a ceremony at this unseemly hour."

"Certainly you can and will. I'm Frank Staples."

The window went down with a bang.

"Know'd I'd fetch him," Frank chuckled. "He's as 'fraid as death I'll give him away."

In a few minutes the door was opened, and they were graciously invited in by the minister's wife, while the parson made no further comments, but figuratively speaking, got down to business beautifully.

In a few minutes after their arrival, Frank and Agnes were pronounced man and wife, and their happiness was complete as they received the legal certificate.

Feeing the parson, Frank and his bride set out on their return to The Cedars.

"Our marriage need not be made public immediately," Frank said, "until I have prepared a nest for my bird. I warned the minister. If any disgrace should fall on me, you need never betray our marriage until I am exonerated."

"You speak strangely, dearest. What disgrace can fall on you, even though you claim to have enemies?"

"I know not in what shape it will come, but I feel it in my bones, as the old saying is, that trouble is brewing."

"Pshaw! Dismiss all such notions, and look on the bright side of life, remembering you've got a burden on your hands now," with a merry laugh.

"And one that I shall be glad to sustain?" was the answer, as he kissed the upturned face.

They reached the gate and parted—Agnes vanishing in the house, and Frank going toward the village, neither of them knowing or suspecting what the morrow would bring forth.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VICTIM OF A VILLAIN.

THE next day, as if prophetic of what was in store for poor Staples, dawned with a sullen, ominous sky, and a steady, pouring rain, which did not cease, even after sunrise.

Bright and early in the morning the deacon and his spouse, who had remained over night at The Cedars, set out for the farm-house. Judge of their astonishment, on reaching home, to find that Cleopatra had vanished.

An alarm was instantly raised, and a search instituted, while the deacon drove furiously back to The Cedars, and gave the alarm there.

The consternation and confusion were fairly at their height when Agatha came down-stairs, and learned of the disappearance.

He manifested considerable agitation, and ordered a thorough search to be made in the vicinity. The result was the finding of the stocking and the note Cleo had scribbled, and it was at once decided that the girl had committed suicide.

While the guests were wondering and gossiping, the deacon and Agatha were closeted in the latter's private parlor, where the owner of The Cedars was pacing to and fro.

"I want an explanation of this matter, and without delay, too," Agatha was saying. "What does the message mean—why did the girl commit suicide?"

"Dear only knows," sighed the deacon. "She was a very peculiar and eccentric child, and I cannot account for this strange affair."

"Had you been chastising her for anything?" Agatha demanded, sharply.

"Oh! bless you, no. We never did that, finding it always easier to coax her. Poor, poor child!"

"Perhaps it is better, as it is," Agatha remarked. "While she lived I intended to look out for her, in consideration for her dead father. If she has taken her own life the charge is removed from my hands. That will do, Hall. Go, now, and set the men to dragging the river. If the body is found, make preparations for a quiet and unostentatious burial."

"But, you forget, sir; there are several months' arrears for her keeping."

"Nonsense. You've had enough. Haven't you had money repeatedly? and, besides, you've got a comfortable home. Begone, sir, and let me hear no more of your further demand for money."

Not being a strong man at an argument, the deacon had no other choice than to obey.

It was his private opinion, however, as he afterward expressed it to Mrs. Hall, that Algernon Agatha, of The Cedars, was in no wise unhappy because Cleopatra had committed suicide.

Men were promptly set to work to drag the river, but no traces of the supposed suicide rewarded the search.

Following close upon this sensation came another.

A bare-headed boy came rushing wildly up to The Cedars, and demanded to see Mr. Agatha at once.

When that gentleman appeared, the boy cried excitedly:

"Oh! mister! mister! Frank Staples sed I should come and tell you to come to the bank just as quick as ever you can. It has been robbed!"

With a startled oath, Agatha ordered his saddle-horse and galloped furiously away toward the village. A considerable crowd was congregated before the bank when Agatha rode up, and they all appeared fully as excited as he.

Staples, with face pale and a scared look in his eyes, admitted him.

"Speak!" Agatha cried, sinking into a chair. "What the deuce does this all mean?"

"Indeed, sir, I cannot tell you, more than that the safe has been robbed of all the paper money—the gold, silver, bonds, and so forth, remain untouched. I first discovered it when I went to open the safe an hour ago."

"Then I am, comparatively speaking, a ruined man!" Agatha gasped, arising and going to the safe. "Why, I see no trace of a burglar's work here, I am sure."

"Because whoever opened the safe did so by knowledge how to do it. They worked the combination, and in closing it left it exactly as they found it. Who ever the burglar was, he must have been well provided with keys, as he unlocked the inner door of the safe, and also the side door of the bank, the lock of which, you are aware, is a very clever piece of mechanism."

"I am so aware. No one but those having an original key could have gotten into the bank. Staples, this all looks very much like you!"

"Sir!"

The young man's face flushed with indignation.

"I repeat it, young man, it looks very much like you. Don't get excited now, for there is not the least bit of use. Were there any signs of burglary it would be different. But there are not. Who ever committed the robbery knew his business, and had everything handy to do it with. As you say, no man could have done the job as it has been done without the two peculiar keys and a knowledge of working the combination. Now you are well aware that you are the only man possessing these advantages. Even I, myself, cannot come into this bank and go into my safe without you open it for me."

"Very true, sir, but that does not signify that I should be suspected of such an outrage—I, who have done my level best to serve your interests faithfully. I knew nothing of the robbery until a few moments ago, when I instantly sent a messenger to notify you."

"Well, maybe you are innocent. I am sure I cannot tell at once. You can remain here until further developments arise. It need not be known but what my loss is nominal. Admit no one until I return."

And, so saying, Agatha quitted the bank.

"The snake!" Frank muttered, as he passed out. "He has gone for a warrant for my arrest. It is as I feared. A blow has been leveled at me by Bloker, and I must fly or go to jail. Which shall I do?"

He paced to and fro with a worried expression of countenance.

"No good can come of trying to escape," he finally decided. "If I am arrested I will submit to the inevitable like a gentleman, and stand my trial. They cannot prove me guilty, except by false evidence. Oh, what a blow this will be to Agnes."

It was not long ere Mr. Agatha returned with the village constable, who was armed with a warrant.

"Sorry for you, Staples," he said, "but I have to arrest you on the charge of being concerned in robbing your employer. You will have to go down to the 'jug' with me."

"As Mr. Agatha has seen fit to vent his spite on me in this manner, I shall not resist," Frank replied calmly. "The blow is unexpected and disgraceful, but as I am wholly innocent, and trust my innocence can be proven, I am not so much concerned as I might otherwise be."

"When your innocence is proven there will be plenty of time for apology," Agatha said, haughtily. "There can be no doubt, however, but what we have got the right man. Away with him, constable! We will have a hearing this afternoon."

And so Frank accompanied the officer to the village jail and was locked up; and a placard was hung on the door of the bank, bearing the inscription:

"TEMPORARILY CLOSED!"

Never in all the history of that particular locality, was there a more wide-spread sensation than that which followed the arrest of young Staples, and the strange (supposed) suicide of Cleopatra Hall.

Even the excitement caused by the latter paled into insignificance compared with the shock caused by Frank's arrest, for since his coming to Rushville, he had been regarded as one of the most exemplary and honorable young citizens, and was liked by everybody.

That he should be accused of robbing his employer was a thing so entirely unexpected that many were severely shocked by the news of his downfall.

CHAPTER XV.

THE VILLAIN'S TRIUMPH.

AFTER causing his arrest, Algernon Agatha went back to his residence and locked himself in his private parlor, where for some time he paced excitedly to and fro.

"I've got him where I want him now," he muttered. "If he don't get sent up for six years, it won't be my fault. The loss of the money falls heavily, but no doubt it can be recovered. Of course I am pretty well satisfied that Staples did not do the robbery, but it makes no difference. He is in my way, and this is a lucky opportunity to get him out. He's too scrupulously honest to tackle such a job. Ah!"

There was a rap on the door.

"A gentleman to see Mr. Agatha," a servant announced, when the door was opened.

"Show him in," the owner of The Cedars said, grimly, for he had an intuition of what was coming.

A moment later Jim Bloker sauntered into the room—not Jim Bloker, the tramp, any longer, but Jim Bloker, gentleman!

He was greatly changed in appearance, from the former rough captain of the tramps, being cleanly shaved and newly attired in a good suit of clothing, with a new hat, new boots and some jewelry. In appearance he would have passed for a well-to-do business man.

Doffing his hat suavely as he entered, he helped himself to a seat without ceremony.

Agatha glared at him savagely for a moment.

"Well, sir," he demanded, haughtily, "who are you, and what is your business here?"

"Dry and crisp as a pie-crust, ain't you?" the tramp flung back. "When did you graduate from the college of bad breeding?"

"Sir, I will have no insolence! State your business."

"Pshaw! I don't get impatient. There's no use hurrying through this life at a gallop. Sit down and put ice-water on your fevered brow. I am Bloker!"

Agatha did not sit down.

He stood erect, his arms folded across his breast, and his eyes glaring at the cool visitor with sullen rage.

"I am aware that you are Bloker. But what do you want?" he gritted.

"Oh, we'll get around to that directly. I came here to have a confidential chat. If you prefer to stand, do so. I presumed you had forgotten me."

"I don't know that I ever saw you before, sir."

"Don't you? Now, that's funny; but you see I know better. The face of Ferris Brandt is not one that is so easily forgotten."

A compression of Agatha's lips was all the answer Bloker received.

"Oh, I see you recognize me," he went on, composedly. "A man with murder on his soul is gifted with a wonderfully acute memory, I have heard said. But, come, come! Sit down, and take it easy."

With what was meant for a sneer of disgust, Agatha dropped upon a chair.

"Well, proceed," he commanded.

"Of course," Bloker assented. "You are aware that you have been a searched-for man, for years, and therefore my sudden appearance here can be a matter of but little surprise. It has been a long, long trail, and the truth has been mighty slow in developing, but at last, thank Heaven, I've got it all in my grasp, and am now ready to proceed to business. One part of my programme is, Algernon Agatha, the taking of your life. Just so sure as the stars shine in heaven, I am to be the man who takes your worthless life. Your doom is sealed, and

squirm and twist though you may, you can not ward it off. It is the one thing inevitable. When you die you die by my hand, you detestable villain."

Agatha did not immediately reply, but his face blanched with alarm and anger, commingled.

"You are rendering yourself liable by your ruffianly threats, sir!" he retorted. "I will have you arrested."

Bloker laughed.

"You're a fool!" was his unflattering declaration. "If you have any idea that the law and I are afraid of each other, you're off you're base. Arrest me, indeed! You'd die the next minute. But, this talk is nonsense. I've come here for an understanding. Mebbe you've found out that Rachel has entirely recovered, and has been discharged from the asylum?"

"Well, what of it?"

"A good deal. You shut my sister up in an insane asylum when she wasn't crazy, because she knew of your murdering a man, named Fortesque, for his money!"

"Tis false—false as—"

"Bab! don't talk to me. I speak of nothing I can not prove. You gave your infant son to a woman with the understanding that he was never to know of his parentage. That's another crime. Thank Heaven, I was at last able to find the child. You procured a divorce from your wife, incarcerated and wronged, and remarried. That was another State's Prison offense."

"How so?"

"You never was legally divorced by the courts."

Agatha's lips quivered, and a devilish expression entered his eyes.

"You came here and started a gang of counterfeiters, and became their chief. That's another crime. Now, what show do you suppose you would stand before a court of justice? But, that ain't all your badness."

"A year ago, or over, a band of tramps came to these parts, headed by my father, old Buck Brandt. You saw and recognized him, and feared he was after you. He, together with his money, suddenly disappeared. Who was the cause of that disappearance?"

"Not I, I'll swear!" Agatha asserted, emphatically. "Come closer, and I'll tell you."

Bloker drew his chair nearer to the owner of The Cedars, and lit a cigar.

"Go on!" he said.

"The tramp's disappearance created considerable comment at the time," Agatha resumed. "A general inquiry was made into the matter, but no information was elicited. It was not, indeed, until a few weeks ago that I found out who murdered your father. It was the cashier of my bank, who is now under arrest—Frank Staples. I learned that he had formerly been a tramp, and extorted a confession from him."

Bloker listened attentively, and gazed at the speaker with a supercilious smile, that more than once caused Agatha to change color.

"Well, I'll be shot if you ain't a good one!" he exclaimed, with a coarse laugh. "Now, do you suppose I'm fool enough to believe that yarn?"

"I assure you it is a fact!"

"Your assurance isn't worth a penny a pound, so far as I am concerned. The idea that you should find out such a thing about young Staples, and still retain him in your employ is too thin. The fact of the matter is, you killed my father, yourself!"

"Tis false!"

"Don't waste your breath! You'll need it all. I am going to kill you. Not in the way you might expect, however. First, you must make reparation for the wrong you have done. You must sign off all your property, and deliver up everything you have in the world to my sister, who is, legally, still your wife."

"You are mad, man!"

"Not overly angry, though I'm apt to rile easy. When you have transferred everything to your wife and her children, I will give you ten hours the start, on a chase for life or death—a race which shall decide whether you escape, or I cut your cursed heart out!"

"I refuse to agree to anything. I fear you not, and defy you to do your worst."

"Then, ten thousand devils seize you, I'll have your life now!"

"Will you?" hissed Agatha, wickedly.

He brought his foot heavily down upon the floor, and instantly that portion of it covered by the Brussels mat shot downward, bearing Jim Bloker into the depths of a pit that was dark and foul smelling.

A minute later, when the trap glided back to its place, the captain of the tramps was not upon it.

"Ha! ha!" Agatha cried. "They'll all play with me, will they? They had a thousand times better throw up the game, for when I play, I always play to win!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXAMINATION.

THE examination of Frank Staples came off that afternoon, before the local justice, and the interest in the affair was so great that the hearing had to take place in the village school-house in order to accommodate the throngs who wanted to be present.

The local justice, Hank Hogland, was considered the wickedest man in the village, being gruff, surly-tempered and coarse-mannered.

The large school-room was well-filled by two o'clock, which was the hour set for the trial.

The justice loomed up behind the teacher's desk, with frowning dignity, and Frank Staples and the constable were seated at his right, while Algernon Agatha and several villagers were positioned at the left.

Immediately after the clock chimed the hour of two, Hogland pounded loudly on the desk, and shouted:

"Order!"

Instantly silence prevailed; and thrusting a huge quid of tobacco into his mouth, the justice turned and glared at the constable.

"Well, what's the charge ag'in' young Staples?" he demanded, gruffly.

"Robbery, sir!" replied the constable. "He is charged with robbing the bank of fifty thousand dollars, sir."

"Who by?"

"Mr. Agatha, sir."

Hogland gave an uncomplimentary grunt as he turned and glared at the owner of The Cedars, for whom he had no great degree of admiration.

"Ye charge Staples with robbin' ye, hey?" he demanded.

"I do," Agatha replied, decisively.

"On what authority, sir—on what authority? What have ye got as proof—as proof, I say?"

"Staples was arrested on suspicion. As you know, he has been my cashier for some time. He had charge of everything, and carried the keys—not only of the bank, but of the safe. The keys were of a peculiar pattern, originally designed for me, and no other keys of the kind exist in these parts. He also was the only one possessing any knowledge of how the combination-lock of the safe worked."

"Didn't you?"

"No, sir; not even I myself."

"Ye'r a fool, then, to trust your bizness all in another man's hands!" Hogland bluntly observed.

"You are here to attend to your duties—not mine!" Agatha retorted. "The bank was entered and the robbery committed by some person having keys to both bank and inner door of the safe, and who also understood the manipulating of the combination. As Staples had the keys—the only ones in existence—it stands to reason he is the man."

Hogland then turned to Frank.

"Well, young man, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Simply that I am guiltless of the crime charged against me," Frank replied.

"Oh, you are? When did you see the money last?"

"When I looked the safe, prior to closing the bank yesterday."

"You left it in the safe?"

"Certainly—every dollar."

"And left the bank right after that?"

"Yes."

"Who was with you?"

"Agatha."

Frank did not feel disposed, just then, to call him Mr. Agatha.

"Where did you go then?"

"We walked down to the river."

"What for?"

"Agatha had a certain lecture to give me in regard to aspiring to his daughter's hand in marriage. He forbade me ever to speak to her again."

"And you—?"

"I refused to comply."

"Bully!" cried the justice, clapping his hands, while the room rung with laughter.

"Order!" shouted Agatha, furiously. "This is something entirely foreign to the case to be tried."

"Shut up, yourself!" roared back the justice.

"I'm runnin' this ark, and I say bully fer Staples! And now, Staples, what did you do next?"

"Agatha left me, and I throw myself on the ground, by the river-sidel!"

"How long did you remain there?"

"Until dark."

"Ah! what were you doing?"

"I dropped into a sleep, sir."

"Indeed! You slept several hours. What awaked you?"

"I do not know. I awaked of my own accord, I suppose."

"Did you feel in your pockets?"

"Yes. The keys were just as I had left them. No one could have got them away from me, without awaking me."

"You are positive of this?"

"I am positive."

"Well, what did you do next?"

"I saw Agatha passing near by, and followed him."

"Ab! what for?"

"To see where he was skulking to, when his guests demanded his attention at The Cedars!"

"Stop! I command this investigation to stop!" Agatha cried, angrily. "There will be a time for this sort of cross-questioning when the case goes to court. Remand the prisoner to jail, sir!"

"You go soak your head!" roared the justice. "I'm runnin' this court, an' I'll run it into the ground, if I like. Sail ahead, young man. Where did you follow Agatha to?"

"To the graveyard on the bluff."

"Hol hol! Queer place to visit at midnight, I'll swear. What did Agatha do?"

"He went to the Agatha vault, and entered it."

"Ha! ha! What did you do then?"

"I went and peeped through the keyhole."

"Hol ho! What did you see?"

Frank looked over toward his accuser.

Agatha's face wore a grayish sort of pallor, and he was gnawing uneasily at his under lip.

"I saw that a light was burning within the vault," Frank said. "I then saw Agatha go and stretch himself out in a rough coffin-like box."

Hogland turned to Agatha.

"Well, this is a new sort of funny bizness," he said, gruffly. "What were you doing in that rough coffin?"

"I don't know, sir, that it is any of your business; still, to quench all curiosity, I will explain, that I am a spiritualist, and occasionally go to the vault, lie down in the empty box, and commune with the spirit of my departed wife."

"Oh! So you can talk with her?"

"Yes, I can and do."

"Which place is she in?"

There was a general titter of laughter at this juncture.

"I decline to say more for the benefit of those who make light of so serious a matter," Agatha answered, severely.

"Oh, suit yourself. All I've got to say you're in luck that you can keep the old lady so far away, and yet talk with her. Wouldn't mind if my old torment were in the same sphere. But, to proceed. What next, Staples?"

"I waited until Agatha reappeared and followed him back as far as The Cedars. He now carried a package of considerable size, which he must have got while in the vault."

"Ah! what was this, Agatha?"

"I decline to answer!" was the savage response. "This matter has been made a farce of. In the name of the law I command you to remand the prisoner to jail to stand his trial at the next session of court."

After a few moments of further parley, Hogland held Staples in five hundred dollars bail to appear at court.

As no one offered to go on the bail-bond, the cashier was taken back to the jail and locked up.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DEADLY COMPACT.

THAT the nocturnal visit to the cemetery would ever react against him, in the way of exposure as it had done, Agatha had not entertained a fear.

The exposure, therefore, had fallen upon him with dampening effect, and he went back to The Cedars in a fearful rage.

He knew the revelation would create widespread comment, if, indeed, the villagers did not take it into their heads to investigate the matter by examining the vault.

"Curse the infernal luck!" he hissed. "It seems as if everything and every one were conspiring to defeat and crush me. But, curse 'em!

curse 'em! I'll beat 'em yet. One man was forever removed from my path to-day, and Staples is where he can do no further harm. She must follow next."

He entered the private parlor, and sat awhile in deep meditation, and then, arising, went to a bookcase and pulled it to one side.

As a result, a narrow door was exposed to view.

"I must make sure that Bloker is dead before I can feel at ease!" he gritted. "He must be, however, for no man could live in that cistern of water."

He unlocked the door, and lighting a lantern, picked his way down a dusty pair of stairs into a small cellar, in the heart of which yawned a great cistern. Any one falling through the trap above could not help going headlong into the depths of this reservoir.

Nor could they easily escape from it, as its walls were smoothly cemented, leaving no chance to get a foot or finger hold.

A fierce oath escaped Agatha, when, by the aid of a rope, he lowered the lantern into the depths of the water pit.

There was not over an inch of water in the bottom, and Jim Bloker was not there!

An investigation of the cellar bottom revealed foot-tracks, both large and small.

"I understand!" Agatha cried. "Bloker was rescued by that young urchin whom I caught yesterday. Unknown to me, he must have been present at our interview."

Further investigation disclosed the fact that the two had made their escape up the stairs which Agatha had just descended.

Anyhow, they were gone, and Agatha had not won his point, after all.

He reascended to the parlor in more of a rage than ever, and remained there until it was dark.

He then loaded the seven chambers of a revolver, and put it in his pocket.

"I'll not be cheated of my prey, after all!" he gritted. "If he's at the tramp camp, I'll put a bullet through him, if I hang for it."

Leaving the mansion, he sought the boathouse, and was soon rowing out upon the river, and toward the bend, where was located the tramps' camp.

He chose the water approach as being the safer. There was less liability of the tramps looking for an attack from that source.

In a short time he came opposite the camp, where a bright fire was burning.

He then pulled slowly and cautiously in toward shore, until he had gained such a position that he could see every man in the camp. Only three villainous-looking vagabonds were there.

To his disappointment he found that neither Bloker nor Rob were among them.

"Foiled in my purpose again!" he gritted.

He sat for some time watching the three men, and at the same time reflecting.

Finally he pulled directly ashore, and had landed 'fore the tramps saw him.

With grunts of disapproval the three sprung to their feet, and stood regarding him sullenly and suspiciously.

"What d'ye want?" one of them demanded.

"We don't know you!"

"No; I presume not. Where is your captain, Bloker?"

"He ain't here—hasn't been here since morning."

"Good. He would now be dead at your feet, if he was here."

"How so?"

"Because I came here for the purpose of killing him. But as he isn't here, I still have to let out the job to you."

The men stared.

"Guess you're crazy, ain't you?" the man who had spoken before said.

"Not a bit of it. I know my biz. Have you heard him mention Algernon Agatha?"

They nodded assent.

"Well, I am he. Bloker is my enemy, and I want him out of the way. He has a woman secreted somewhere, not far away, who likewise must die. You hear? You must shadow Bloker till you find him with the woman. Then you must kill them both. Then, when you come and conduct me to the spot where they are dead, I will give you each a large sum of mon'."

The tramps exchanged glances.

Then their spokesman said:

"How much, boss?"

"A hundred dollars apiece."

"Not enough. We ain't bought for nothin', you bet. Money talks wi' us, when there's any bloody work to be did."

"Well, how much will you do the job for, and make no botch of it?"

The tramps held a whispered conversation.

Some of them did not seem to like the idea of going back on their own leader.

Finally, however, the spokesman turned around:

"I reckons, boss, the cheapest we kin do the job, an' guarantee it, is two hundred and fifty apiece."

"Very well."

"An' we gets the money, sure, when the job is done?"

"Yes."

"All right. We're yer huckleberries, then. Mind, though, if we don't get the money, yer pie's all dough."

"You need have no fear."

And with this assurance, Agatha re-entered his boat and rowed back toward The Cedars, congratulating himself that, after all, he was once more ahead of the field.

He had no doubt but what the greed of the tramps for money would spur them on to commit the double crime which would remove two dangerous obstacles from his path.

He was not aware that the compact had been overheard. And so he went back to The Cedars, forming in his mind bold plans for the future.

The person who had overheard the compact, and who afterward crept cautiously away, was the irrepressible young vagabond, Rob!

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLOKER'S VISIT.

SOMETHING like an hour before dark, Jim Bloker, after several denials, succeeded in gaining admittance to the jail, and Frank Staples's cell.

Although regarded with suspicion, he had been able to show up a detective's badge, and on the strength of that had gained admission.

Staples looked him over in surprise.

The tramp captain's clothes were somewhat soiled, from his fall into the pit, from which, as Agatha had surmised, he had been rescued by his young protege, Rob.

Bloker seated himself on the edge of the bed, and regarded Frank steadily.

"I suppose, young man, you don't have much of an idea who I am, eh?" he said, gruffly.

"I have not that honor," Frank replied, quietly, "as I do not believe I ever met you before."

"No, you didn't. You used to know my old man, though. I am Ferris Brandt, though latterly I have sailed under the name of Jim Bloker."

"Ah, indeed! Then I am glad to meet you," he said, pleasantly. "When I was with your father's party, I thought a great deal of him, and am equally glad to know his son, of whom he frequently spoke."

And he put forth his hand.

Bloker hesitated a moment before accepting it; then, as if ashamed of himself, he seized it and shook it heartily.

"So the old man used to speak of me, eh?" he said, grimly. "Well, I s'pose he's dead now."

"So I have heard since coming to this vicinity," Frank replied—"that is, they say he mysteriously disappeared. You see, I got tired of tramping, and made up my mind to strike out for something better. I left the party about fifty miles north of here, and did not know that Brandt had gone under until six months ago, when I happened along here."

"You are sure?"

"Why, certainly."

"Well, maybe you're right. But, ye see, the boys have been searchin' for you, high an' low, suspicionin' ye of killin' the old man an' gittin' his boodle."

"That was unreasonable and unjust. I was miles away from here at the time of his disappearance; and, too, he would have been the last man I would have thought of injuring."

"Well, I begin to take a little more stock in you myself than I did at first, although I'll swear I don't know how the boys'll feel. If I thought you killed the old man, I'd kill ye before I left this jail!"

"Well, I guess you would be serving me right. Anyhow, I'll guarantee you need not go to that trouble. I did not kill your father. And I hope I may never be provoked into killing any man."

"Algernon Agatha informed me that you had confessed to him that you killed Buck Brandt!"

"The lying knave! He is capable of telling anything, that man is!"

"I believe you there. If you knew all about him that I do, you'd be horrified."

"Have you thought of looking to him for the murderer of your father?"

"I have, and it is for the purpose of learning

of you, concerning the vault business, that I came here."

"Were you at my hearing to-day?"

"Yes."

"Then you heard there all I know about the matter."

"But you have a mind, and 'most every mind has a habit of thinking a great deal. You must have some ideas."

"So I have. I told all I saw. Agatha laid down in that coffin, and when he left the vault he had the bundle. It's my impression that the coffin covers the entrance to a lower vault, and that is where he got the bundle from."

"What do you suppose was in the bundle?"

"I have had a suspicion that it was counterfeit money."

"Your surmise is correct, Staples. There is undoubtedly a lower vault, as you say, or, at least, some sort of a place, and quartered therein Agatha has a gang of men engaged in manufacturing counterfeit money."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Then, in this place, you may find some clew that will throw light on the disappearance of your father."

"I hope so. And now that I am satisfied that you are in no way implicated in the matter, I'll see what I can do to get you out of your present fix. You may have to remain shut up a few days, but you will eventually be set free."

"Do you know anything about the robbery?"

"That would not be policy for me to say, whether I did or not."

"Well, I know I didn't do it."

"So do I. But I must be going now. Keep a stiff upper lip, and remember that Jim Bloker ain't the worst fellow on earth, after all."

Then the captain of the tramps rapped for the warden, and was ushered out of the jail, leaving Frank in better spirits than he had been.

CHAPTER XIX.

FATHER AND SON.

AFTER leaving the village jail, Bloker did not go direct to the camp, but ascended the bluff to the cemetery.

"We will endeavor to ascertain what secrets the Agatha family tomb has to unfold," he muttered, grimly. "It may be I shall be able to unearth some important discovery."

When he arrived at the entrance to the vault, he drew a large bunch of keys from his pocket, and tried different ones in the lock.

It was several minutes, however, ere he succeeded in finding one that would fit in the door and unfasten it.

Once inside the vault, he locked the door behind him, and struck a light.

There was a lantern hanging upon a nail, and lighting this, he soon had the place brilliantly illuminated.

He then gazed grimly around at the different coffins.

"A reg'lar death's den," he muttered, feeling none too comfortable, despite his bluff, daredevil nature. "If some of these cadavers should jump up an' yell at me I wonder what I should do?"

The dead, however, were not on the jump, that night, and there were no spiritual manifestations.

After making sure that everything was right, Bloker advanced to the lidless coffin-box, and kneeling beside it, made a critical examination of its construction.

He found that it was fastened to the ground, and that by touching a spring, the bottom could be pushed downward. The theory of its working was on weights. When the bottom of the box was up, the weights were at the bottom of the pit. When a person of fairly good weight stood upon the bottom it descended, and naturally, the weights arose.

"Taking all things into consideration, Agatha is a sharp sort o' rooster," Bloker said, admiringly. "He'd do to head a gang o' tramps."

Not knowing what danger lurked below, he swung the lantern on his arm, and drew his revolver.

Then, stepping into the box, he touched the spring, and shot downward, out of sight.

When the bottom of the shaft was reached, he stepped from the platform, and it glided back up to its place.

After examining the lower workings of the trap, Bloker continued along the passage, and finally arrived in the main chamber, where the counterfeiting was done.

He made a thorough examination of all the tools and appliances of the craft, and then for the first, began to think of his errand.

"I have seen no place where the old man

could be concealed, yet!" he muttered, looking carefully around. "Still, if he lives, he must be somewhere around here."

While he was thus gazing about, he for the first discovered an opening in the wall, guarded by an iron door, which a supporting timber had hitherto obstructed from his gaze.

His heart beating faster with anticipation, he hurriedly approached the grating and flashed the light of his lantern into the dungeon, which was walled up with stone.

The sight he saw thrilled him both with anger and satisfaction.

Seated upon a block of stone, with his head bowed forward in his hands, was an old man.

His hair was long, as was also his full beard, and both would have been snowy white if it were not for their tangled, dirty appearance.

He was clad in rags. Indeed, it seemed a wonder how he could keep the mass of tatters from falling off his figure.

He was evidently asleep.

Jim Bloker's face softened, and its expression underwent a change. Tears stood in his eyes, for perhaps the first time in years, and for a time his emotion was too great for him to give utterance, as he gazed at the wreck of him who he had no doubt was his father.

At length he conquered his agitation, and rapped upon the door.

"Wake up, Buckley Brandt!" he cried in a loud voice. "Are you asleep?"

The old man did not raise his head, but he spoke:

"Go away, Algernon Agatha. Have you not tortured me enough, without constantly intruding your presence? I want no food. I have made up my mind to die, and end my misery, and when I die, the secret of where I buried my wealth dies with me. Go 'way, I say."

"But look up, Buckley Brandt!" Bloker cried. "I am not Agatha. I am your own son, Ferris, come to your rescue."

The prisoner gave a gasp of joy, and looked up, shading his eyes with his hand.

"What? You my son, Ferris Brandt?" he faintly articulated.

"Bet your boots I am, father, and I've come to set you free."

"Then God be praised! I have feared I should never leave this place alive. Tell me, Ferris—tell me of Rachel?"

"I have good news, father. She is alive and well, and has wholly recovered her mind. And it is but a short time off, yet, when she shall reign at The Cedars, in the place of Algernon Agatha."

"God be praised again. But hurry up, my boy. You may be surprised here."

"Little danger, I guess. Still I will use all haste possible."

Setting briskly to work, he was not long in breaking the lock and opening the door, and then father and son were clasped in each other's arms.

Within half an hour the twain were *en route* for the shanty up the river.

CHAPTER XX.

YOUNG LOVERS.

RUSTLING ROB had confided to Bloker the fact of his having Cleopatra in custody, and the tramp captain had at once come to the conclusion that she was none other than the child of the man Eustace Stenwick had murdered for his money.

He kept his own counsel in regard to this matter, however, and advised Rob to fetch Cleo to the riverside shanty, where she could have the companionship of her former foster-mother.

Therefore, on leaving the camp, after overbearing the compact between Agatha and the tramps, Bob made his way to the old schoolhouse down the country road, a couple miles from The Cedars.

On his arrival there he found everything quiet, and no one would have suspected that there was any one within the little building, for the shutters were tightly closed.

Rapping upon the door, Rob uttered a sound resembling the croak of a frog several times, and then listened.

In a moment there was the sound of moving feet inside, and Cleo's voice cried:

"Is that you, Rob?"

"You bet, Plucksy. Open up, and let me in."

A moment later the door was opened, and Rob entered the school-room just in time to have Cleo's arms thrown about his neck, and get a kiss upon the cheek.

"Now tell me, Robbie, all about everything."

"Git out! What der ye take me fer—a walkin' cypherhead? I s'pose you want the news?"

"Oh! yes! yes!"

"Well, all right. But ye know thar's a duty on that staple article, an' I shall have to exact a kiss as revenue."

He got it, too, ere the words were scarcely out of his mouth.

"Well, ye see, there was a big time over your disappearance," he began, "an' so many tears was shed that the river rose a foot inside an hour."

"Oh! Rob, what a story!"

"Nothin' of the sort, you bet. They found yer sock, an' give yer up for gone up the spout. Hain't seen any tombstones flyin' around thru' the air yet, but I dare say there will be directly. But I've got the greatest thing to tell ye! What d'ye s'pose I am?"

"Oh! well, you're a first-class boy!"

"Pshaw, now, you make me feel flat. But, I say, just guess again."

"Oa! I can't. Tell me."

"Well, I'm a duke!"

"A what?"

"A reg'lar duke—that is, I'm a nob—a blue-blooded aristocrat—a bon-bon!"

Cleo burst into a merry laugh.

"Why, a bon-bon is candy, Robbie. You mean bon-ton, don't you?"

"Mebby I do—anyhow, I'm a blood, and henceforth I wear nothing less than a seven-dollar tile and two-dollar suspenders, you bet."

"But, Rob, I don't understand you. You talk crazy. What's the jingle?"

"On, I shall faint, if I tell you. Phew! just think of a high-toner condescendin' ter git inter common river-water, an' rescuin' you. My, oh! Hereafter I perform my morning ablutions in nothing but rose-water. But, I say. Ye know old Agatha, who hangs out at The Cedars, an' slings on more English than a Scotch terrier?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Well, what d'ye think?"

"Why, I don't know what to think!"

"Just like me. Old Agatha is my dad!"

"What?"

"Factum Factorum, I assure ye. He's my parental dad!"

"Why, Rob, how can that be? You must be mistaken. He is a great gentleman, while you're nothing but a tramp."

"On! he's a healthy old gent, he is. Ef I were gatherin' up slop in Chicky-i-a-go, I'd feel ten notches up the incline ahead o' him. He's my dad, however, an' I'm the future Agatha o' The Cedars."

"How did you find this out, Robbie?"

"From Bloker, who turns out to be my uncle. Ye see, the old man—I mean Agatha—put mother in the crazy asylum, when I was a kid, an' left me to shift fer myself. An' now mother is got out, an' we're goin' ter make it red-hot fer Agatha. He'll think a Fourth-o'-July sunset has hit him afore Bloker an' me gits through wi' him. Oh! you bet he'll get sent up fer life, or mebbe longer. But I say, Plucks, old gal, ain't it boss, tho'? One o' these days ye'll see me ridin' out in ther Agatha barouche and cuttin' a figger. Jewhittaker! but I'll be a senator, tho'!"

"I can't say I am glad to hear the news, Rob," Cleo said, slowly.

"Ye ain't? An' why not?"

"It seems to me I would rather you would remain as you are now."

"What for?"

"Because, then I could know you. If you turned out to be a rich man's son you would never think of noticing a poor outcast like me, who does not even know her own parents."

She spoke so feelingly that Rob's impulsive nature was touched, and peering down into her face he saw tears glistening in her eyes.

"Fergit you!" he cried, putting his arm around her. "Well, now, I guess not. Rustling Rob don't fergit them he likes, an' so I reckon it will be a cold day when he fergits you."

"Do you like me, Rot?"

"Do I? Well, I reckon. You're jest the purtiest, most scrumptious gal I've seen, an' that settles it. Bloker says I'm older'n I calculate on, an' when I git to be an Agatha, d'ye know what I'm goin' to do?"

"No. What, Robbie?"

"I'm goin' to git you a place ter wash dishes in my kitchen!"

Cleo gave a gasp of surprise.

"Robert!"

"Oh! pshaw! I was only joking. I'm going to marry you. There, now, does that fit yer hook an' line?"

"Oh! Robbie. Will you, really? I—I would so like to be your wife!"

"Then it's settled. We'll seal the 'pack, here, like others do."

And kissing her, he drew a brass ring from his pocket and placed it on her forefinger.

"There, it ain't gold; but it answers just the same purpose, fer it's eighteen carrots brass, an' he's got effekshun engraved upon it. Now we're engaged, an' thar ain't no gittin' around that, an' if you go fer any other feller, without my leave or license, I'll sue ye fer britches of promise. Do ye *forstay*!"

"I understand," Cleo said, nestling closer to him, "and I am very happy to know I have the promise of so brave a protector through life as you."

What more might have been said it is hard to tell, for just then the sound of voices reached their hearing.

For an instant each looked the other in the face in a startled way.

Then Rob stole out into the little entry that guarded the door, and peered out into the night.

In a moment he returned.

"Quick! get inside!" he said, in a shrill whisper. "A white man an' two niggers is comin' up the hill, toward the school-house, and one of the party is the old rattlesnake, Deacon Hall!"

Cleo instantly asserted her presence of mind.

"No! we mustn't go in there—they'd find us sure!" she said. "Let's slip out, and run."

She put the movement to the test, and both soon had the school-house between them and the approaching trio.

A rail fence and some brier bushes offered them temporary protection from discovery, and they took advantage of it.

CHAPTER XXI.

VENGEANCE.

THE offer Algernon Agatha had made the three tramps was one that they could not well pass by unimproved.

Two hundred and fifty dollars, clean cash, for each man, was something they were not liable to pick up in the course of many a long tramp about the country, and the job for which they were to receive the sum, was one that they could easily accomplish.

Every man had committed some particular crime, in the course of his existence, that in his own opinion would debar him from inheriting the mercy of the Creator, and hence, a great mistake with thousands of people, he decided it could not matter much how great an offense he committed—he would be condemned, anyhow.

After Agatha's departure the tramps had a long consultation, and, as a result, the decision was unanimous that they should put Jim Bloker out of the way and earn the blood-money.

One of their number, a man by the name of Stean, was detailed to scout, to hunt up the tramp captain, and on locating him, report the result to the others.

It was near midnight ere he reported.

He stated that he had found Bloker conducting an old man to the shanty, up the river, and had, by following them, ascertained that a woman was also located in the same shanty—undoubtedly the same one that Agatha had referred to.

Whereupon the trio of villains at once left the camp, and like shadows of ill-omen, moved up the river.

Not a word was spoken until they were close in the vicinity of the isolated shanty, now dark and silent.

After consultation, they seized a log, and advanced upon the works, as it were.

But one thought was uppermost in their minds.

Money! money!

They knew not that the man who had been their leading spirit, had scented their approach, and had removed his aged father and sister to a place of safety. And, as they advanced upon the shanty, Jim Bloker stood in the shadow of the trees, and looked at them.

In either hand was a revolver.

"They have turned on me, who guided 'em through many a difficulty," he muttered, his voice low and stern. "Why have they done it? I need scarcely ask that. The hand of Algernon Agatha is plain to be seen in this movement. He sent them here to end the work he began years ago—the killing of his wife. Oh, had I him here now, what mercy would I have for him!"

He ceased to soliloquize for an instant, for just then Stean rapped upon the door of the shanty.

"Wake up, Jim!" he cried. "I want ye." Of course there was no answer from within. The tramps waited.

They were plainly under Stean's captaincy.

"Cuss ye, aire ye goin' ter open up?" he yelled after a pause, pounding loudly on the door.

"Yes, I'm goin' to open up!" Jim Bloker muttered, from his position among the trees. "I'm bad enough, I'll admit, but I ain't ther galoot as goes back on a pard—oh, no! I'd quicker cut my own throat than hire out to kill a pard, what had treated me on the square."

The moon was out, and in its light Stean stood in plain view.

"Down with the door!" he cried. "Remember this aire a money job, boys!"

The men with the battering-ram rushed forward and lunged it against the door.

The crash of the concussion, however, did not drown the echo of a pistol report.

Stean threw up his hands, gave a gasp, and fell prostrate to the ground.

The men, seeing him fall, dropped the battering-ram in alarm, and turned and gazed wildly about like a herd of startled deer, then, paralyzed with terror, ran off, and the grim avenger's work was done.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE VAULT.

WITH curiosity not unmixed with anxiety, Rob and Cleo watched the three dusky figures climb the hill and approach the little old red school-house.

"I tell ye, I don't believe the gal drowned herself!" the deacon's voice was heard to say. "She hadn't the pluck to do it, and I'll bet my big hoss she's a-hidin' in this school-house."

"Yous too hopeful, boss!" the voice of the negro, Abe, spoke up. "I tolle you I done cl'ar b'lebe de gal in de bottom ob de ribber, an' dar's no use ob youh trampin' us about de country, at dis yere time o' night, nobow!"

"Mebbe not. Mebbe not. But we'll see—we'll see. Ef she ain't in this school-house we will have to give her up for lost."

They were soon out of sight in the entry.

"Now we must take leg-bail for security," Rob said to Cleo. "Take hold of my hand and let's scoot."

They suited the action to the word and were soon well away from the spot.

Rob then shaped his course so it would bring him to the lone shanty by the river.

He had not as yet met his mother, and he looked forward to the meeting with much eagerness.

When they neared the shanty, he left Cleo among the trees and went forward to reconnoiter.

When he returned his face wore a more serious look than usual, but he did not confide to Cleo what he had seen—the stark, lifeless body of the tramp lying near the shanty.

"They tried it on Bloker," he muttered, "but they didn't catch him napping."

To Cleo he simply said:

"They've taken a change of base. We shall have to hunt for 'em."

It was past the midnight hour that night when Algernon Agatha retired to rest.

But rest he could not.

The moon sent a ghostly sort of light in through his window; the wind sighed a mournful dirge through the tree-tops.

For an hour the owner of The Cedars lay with his eyes partly closed, endeavoring to sleep, but it was no use, and he finally sprung out of bed with an oath and dressed himself.

"I don't see what the deuce has got into me," he muttered. "Something seems to be weighing upon my mind, and yet I know not what it is."

He stood gazing out of the window for awhile; then putting on his hat he left the house.

Whether of his own accord or not, his footsteps turned toward the graveyard on the bluff, and he quickened his pace.

His brow was clouded, and there was a hunted look in his cold gray eyes, not pleasant to see.

Climbing the hill, he entered the graveyard, and took a good look about, to satisfy himself that he was not followed this time.

He then went down to the vault and unlocked the door.

As he flung it open, he peered cautiously into the unearthly place with a shudder, as if expecting to see a ghost.

Nor was he disappointed; as he entered and approached the trap coffin-box, he discerned the unmistakable outlines of a white-robed figure lying in it, and a yell of horror pealed from his lips.

Instantly the figure assumed a sitting posture,

and he saw, even in the gloom, that it was a woman.

"You!" he gasped—"you, Rachel!"

"Yes, I, vile wretch!" the woman cried, regaining her feet, and taking a step toward him. "What brings you here?"

"Business!" he replied, compressing his lips grimly. "Where is Bloker?"

"He and my father, Buckley Brandt, have also gone away on business. What it is, you may be able to surmise."

Agatha gritted his teeth together.

"Curse 'em!" he uttered, under his breath.

Then aloud, he said:

"Rachel, once more we have met, and I will take advantage of the opportunity to speak. I have been a very wicked man, but I am sincerely repentant, and glad that matters are no worse than they are. Rachel, hear me, I beseech of you. Let the past be buried, never to be resurrected, and return to me as my own loving wife. I will cherish and protect you, and more than doubly atone to you for my wrongdoing in the past. I will do your slightest bidding willingly, and not a wish of yours shall remain ungratified. Only say you will come back to me as my wife, and love me again, and I will be the happiest man on earth."

His appeal was earnest and eloquent, and no one who did not understand his evil nature could have doubted that he was not speaking as a repentant man.

Rachel heard him passively.

His words did not appear to rouse any semblance of feeling or commiseration for him in her bosom.

"I am already your wife, in a legal sense, Algernon Agatha," she replied, coldly, "for the divorce you procured, years ago, was not according to law, and consequently I am still your wife. As to my returning to you—never! If you choose to place me in your stead in The Cedars, all well and good. You will be allowed to escape from the country, and your son will be reared to be a more fitting representative of the name of Agatha than you have ever been. If you refuse to do this, Heaven only knows what your fate will be, for my brother is on your trail!"

"You refuse, then, to live with me again as my wife?"

"I do—a thousand times, yes! I will never live with you again."

"Then curses of the infernal seize you! I'll kill you here and leave you in your tomb!" Agatha cried, drawing a dagger from his bosom and rushing forward.

"Back! back!" Rachel cried. "You come at the peril of your life!"

Blinded with passion, he heeded not her warning.

His weapon flashed up and down through the air and she uttered a scream.

Then, as she fell, there were two pistol-shots. Agatha reeled toward the open door.

He had been hard hit.

She whom he had so bitterly wronged lay upon the floor of the vault, motionless.

"She is dead!" he gasped, glancing back for an instant, "and I am her murderer. Oh, God! what have I done? I am badly wounded, too. I must get away from here!"

He locked the door of the vault, and set out on his return to The Cedars.

His step was unsteady, and several times he came near falling.

The end, clearly, was not far off.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END OF THE RACE.

RUSHVILLE, the next morning, had fresh food for gossip.

Algernon Agatha, the owner of The Cedars, was lying at the point of death, in his own elegant bedchamber.

He was mortally wounded, said the village doctor; but refused to disclose how he had received his injury.

The minister had been sent for, and the family attorney.

They waited in the parlor below.

The doctor, the Vandervliets, and Agnes were the only ones in attendance upon the sick man.

He was failing rapidly, and it required all the skill of the physician to strengthen him sufficiently for what he had to do.

All the color had left his face, and he looked haggard and deathly.

At length he summoned Mrs. Vandervliet to the bedside.

"I am strong enough now, I think," he said, in a husky voice. "Are you ready?"

The woman bowed.

She was perfectly composed.

"Then send for the minister. Let me have the mortgage!"

She took a legal-looking document from her pocket, and handed it to him.

He looked it over, and then, with a compression of his colorless lips, tore it into bits.

"That ends that!" he said, grimly. "Ah! parson, is that you?"

"It is, sir. How are you feeling?"

"Poorly. I am not long for this world. Parson, before I die I want you to perform a little service for me. I am going to make this lady my wife, and my daughter is to marry her son!"

"Father, I am not!" Agnes cried, rising from the bedside. "I cannot marry Valentine Vandervliet!"

"But you must, child!"

"I will not—cannot!"

"And why not? Will you not gratify the last request and wish of your dying parents?"

"I cannot, father. I am already the wife of Frank Staples!"

"This is false," he gasped.

"No, it is true!" spoke up the parson. "I performed the ceremony myself."

Baffled, Agatha lay for a moment, looking from face to face.

"This is too bad!" he said, at length. "It cannot be helped, I suppose, nor need it interfere with my marriage. Parson, you may unite this lady and myself."

"Not if the court knows itself!" a voice cried, and Jim Bloker, alias Ferris Brandt, stepped into the room. "That 'ar old piece o' corporosity belongs to me, an' I've got somethin' to say. She ain't Mrs. Senator Vandervliet at all, but just plain Mrs. Jack Spicer, my wife, who gave me the shake a number o' years ago, an' ain't got no divorce. Them's facts!"

With a scream of rage Mrs. Vandervliet rushed at her accusing spouse and would probably have made an attempt to claw his eyes out but for his clinched fist, which dealt her a blow between the eyes that landed her on her back.

For an instant the confusion was great, and the doctor was forced to eject all the parties from the room except Bloker, who refused to go.

"No!" he declared; "I'm goin' to stay here and see that things is done up brown. If I am molested there'll be some tall shootin', ye can bet! Send for the lawyer."

"Yes, send for him!" Agatha echoed. "I will make my will."

The attorney was directly ushered in and took his place by the bedside, with writing materials.

Stimulants had to be administered to Agatha, to keep him from losing his strength altogether.

As soon as he was stronger, he turned his face toward Bloker.

"Well, I suppose I might as well give in beat," he said, "and do the square thing. I have at last been baffled at every turn, and it is no use for me to try any more."

"You're sensible, for once!" Bloker said. "Go to work an' straighten out what kinks you can."

"Yes! yes! I may as well. Did I kill her?"

"No! She was more scared than hurt, sustaining only a slight wound."

"Is she here?"

"Yes—she, the old man, your boy, and the child of Fortesque, whom you murdered for his money."

"Ah! you knew the latter?"

"I tumbled to it!"

"Well, there is fortune in keeping for her, in New York. Among my papers will be found everything necessary to establish her identity. Send for them all to come up."

Bloker obeyed, and in a few minutes the dying man was confronted by those he had wronged.

Mrs. Agatha was very pale, from the effects of her fright and wound, but was otherwise composed.

Old Buckley Brandt was attired in a new suit of clothes, and Rob boasted of the same luxury.

Agatha regarded him a moment, critically, and then a look of admiration lit up his face.

"Come here, my boy," he said, putting out his hand. "I want to talk to you."

Rob obeyed, his countenance sober, and his eyes moist.

"I am proud of you, my boy," Agatha said, "although you have no cause to be proud of me. I never expected to see you again. I suppose you know I have been a very bad man?"

"Well, yes, I'm onto that much," Rob replied, soberly.

"I have been worse than bad—I have been a wretch of deepest dye. I hope, my son, you will never turn out bad."

"I hope I'll get hung if I do!" was the blunt answer. "I don't run much to bad."

"I am glad to hear it. I would I could live to see you a good man. But fate ordains that I must die. You are, after my death, the last male representative of the Agatha race. May God grant that you do honor to the name. I shall make you my heir, with the proviso that you always take care of your mother and sister."

"Oh! you bet I'll do that!"

"And, there is another thing, my boy. I once killed a man, and yonder is his child. Regretting my deed, I have always cared for her, and I want you to do the same, until such a time as she shall be able to rely on her own resources."

"That's already settled," Rob declared, with a beaming countenance. "We're engaged to be married one of these days."

"And I heartily approve of your choice, and may God bless you both and forgive me. Lawyer, you may draw up the will."

This was done, Agatha giving minute directions; then it was duly signed and witnessed.

"And, now, there's another thing!" Bloker said. "Frank Staples is locked up in jail for a crime he is not guilty of. You must withdraw you charge."

"Do you know who robbed the bank?"

"I do. Knowing the money to belong rightfully to your wife and children, I did the job myself!"

"Then you must attend to it. Where is the money?"

"That I cannot tell. I secreted it where I supposed it would be safe, and when I came to look for it, to-day, it was gone!"

"I've got it," Rob said. "I saw you bury it, and I gobbled on to it fer safe-keeping."

Agatha begged forgiveness of those he had wronged, and, without exception it was granted.

The minister was then summoned, and offered prayers, in which all joined.

Agatha lingered along, until mid-day, and then dropped asleep in death.

What remains to be told can be briefly chronicled.

Matters were hushed up as much as possible, and the true inwardness of Agatha's sinful life never became generally known.

The secret of the counterfeiting business was buried and the "tools" destroyed.

The men who had worked the thing had taken the cue in time and fled.

Of course Mrs. Agatha—as she decided to be known, came into possession of The Cedars, as Rob was a minor, but the presence of her children and her father, helped to make the remainder of her days more enjoyable.

The money Rob had possessed himself of was restored to the bank. Buckley Brandt also added his fortune to it, which he had secreted before being captured by his villainous son-in-law.

Frank Staples was released from jail, and became president of the prosperous bank, and eventually became a highly esteemed and influential citizen.

The tramp whom Bloker had shot was never found, and it was supposed that his comrades had removed the body.

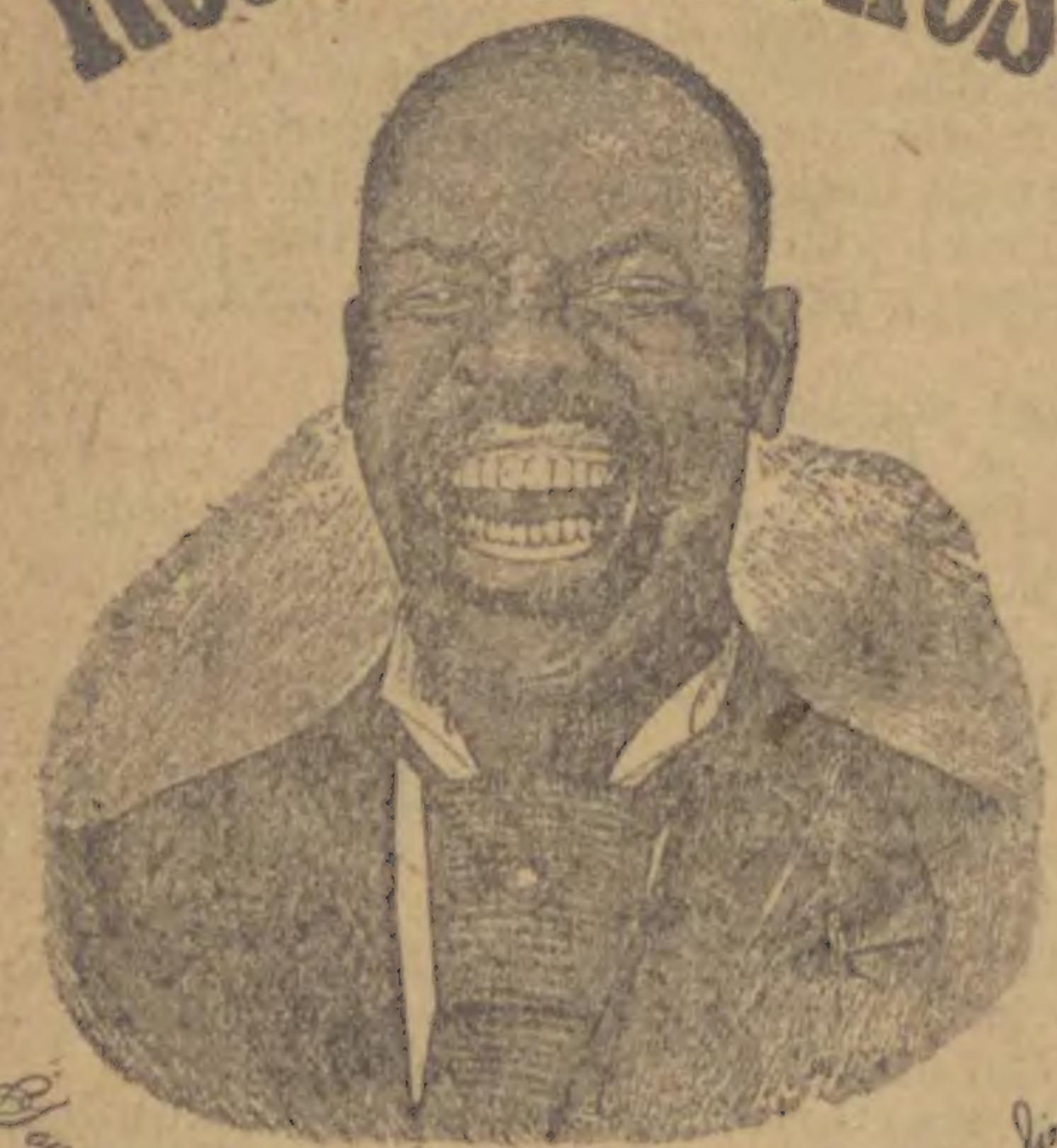
As for Rustling Rob, prospective heir to The Cedars and the wealth of Grandfather Brandt, he very quickly adapted himself to the new conditions. Bright and pushing, he determined on having a good education, and was, in student life, as much a rustler as when a vagabond, he had to rustle for the very food he craved. He went to a capital training-school in Connecticut, near New Haven, prepared for entry to Yale College, with prospects of honors before him, but dropped out in his Sophomore year because Cleo, having graduated from a noted Virginia Academy, could not possibly consent to three years more of separation.

So the young master of The Cedars returned to his Virginia home, and one glorious day in June the mansion was given up to the festivities of a marriage that is remembered as the great event of that lovely region. The persecuted, neglected Cleo, had rounded out into a most beautiful womanhood, and under her presence and guidance The Cedars more than regained its pristine celebrity.

As for Ferris Brandt he could not stand the restraints and polish of the society that now centered in and around the estate he had done so much to restore to its rightful owner; so he soon drifted away to the wild West, and as a successful rancher in New Mexico finds just the condition and associations that insure his happiness.

THE END.

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